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ESSAY

BRITISH-HUNGARIAN RELATIONS POST-BREXIT

Tamás Péter Baranyi – Péter Stepper

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to provide an overview of the state of British-Hungarian relations post-Brexit. The study explores the factors that have fundamentally shaped British-Hungarian relations before 2020, as Brexit has only changed them, but they have obviously not disappeared without a trace. The study is intended to help Hungarian foreign policy, hence it makes some concrete suggestions for Hungarian decision-makers on how to respond to the challenges of Brexit, to ensure that Hungary does not simply suffer the crises caused by Brexit, but becomes an actor that understands the situation, interprets its own interests effectively, and is even able to shape them.

Keywords*: UK, Brexit, European politics, foreign policy*

INTRODUCTION

The overall aim of this article is to provide an overview of the state of British-Hungarian relations post-Brexit. The paper does not aim to portray Brexit as a tragic, negative symptom, or to emphasise its failure, as it is not necessarily the cause of the crisis, but a symptom of a wider European crisis. The changes brought about by Brexit are complex, they have not only created challenges but also opportunities that can only be seized if their true nature is understood and not just examined on the surface. The study therefore explores the factors that have fundamentally shaped British-Hungarian relations before 2020, as Brexit has only changed them, but they have obviously not disappeared without a trace. The study is intended for Hungarian foreign policy makers. It is intended to help them make more effective foreign policy decisions and to provide a basis for a more successful argument in favour of the Hungarian position. The study also makes some concrete suggestions for Hungarian decision-makers on how to respond to the challenges of Brexit, to ensure that Hungary does not simply suffer the crises caused by Brexit, but becomes an actor that understands the situation, interprets its own interests effectively, and is even able to shape them.

THE CONTEXT OF BREXIT

The UK public voted in a referendum on 23 June 2016 to leave the European Union. The news was surprising because pollsters had systematically underestimated the number of people who would vote to leave. Although the practice of holding referendums was not well established in the British political system, in this case, as in the case of the Scottish independence referendum a little earlier, the result of the referendum was recognised as binding. Since then, it has become clear that the pro-Brexit campaign has been able to mobilise voters who were not previously regular voters, so their data has not been excluded from opinion polls.[1]

The success of the Brexit campaign has made it clear that Britain must leave the European Union, even if there was no precedent for doing so, and even if most of the country's political elite thought it was a disastrous decision. From that point on, even the Conservative Party, which has been in government uninterruptedly since 2010, albeit in different formations, saw the implementation of Brexit as a kind of 'crisis management'. This was also the case, for

example, with Theresa May's government, who led the country between 2016 and 2019 as a former Remain Conservative. During May's government, the dominant discourse was how to 'soften' Brexit as much as possible, and this was the prevailing position in the negotiations between London and the European Union. May's cabinet, which was reconstituted after each election, was eventually consumed by its political problems, and at the end of 2019 Boris Johnson won the Conservative Party's internal election, which clearly signalled that the whole governing party was rallying behind the hard Brexit option, which was Johnson's idea. And in the general election of 12 December 2019, the Conservatives won a historic victory, proving that the British people, while they may regret the implementation of Brexit, had essentially rallied overwhelmingly behind the governing party. Johnson has therefore been given a very strong mandate to leave the European Union as soon and as clearly as possible.[2]

The EU and Britain have previously had very complex negotiations on how to achieve a Brexit, but then based on a plan to "soften" the country after Brexit, not to deliver on the election promise as soon as possible. This led to tough and protracted negotiations, made particularly difficult by the Irish question, since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement prohibited any physical border between the two states on the territory of the island of Ireland, while leaving the EU would have required the establishment of a border from Northern Ireland, which would no longer be an EU member, to the Republic of Ireland, which would of course remain an EU member. The complicated, policy solution that eventually became Johnson's name solved this problem by placing a maritime and air border between Northern Ireland and Britain, covering certain goods and to a certain extent. After complex negotiations (see the official European Council register for their agenda)[3] , Britain left the European Union on 31 January 2020.

Reclaiming sovereignty

The most essential element of Brexit, the central theme of the campaign, was the idea of regaining British sovereignty. While on several issues, leaving the European Union could indeed have put competences back into the hands of the British government, over which integration had weakened its influence, in fact Brexit itself was a threat to sovereignty. After all, the exit posited the UK as a

single, homogeneous and sovereign state, when in fact it was a dynamic, early modern asymmetrical union between England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The unevenness of the Brexit referendum results (England and Wales voted overwhelmingly to leave, Scotland and Northern Ireland overwhelmingly to remain) and the divergent attitudes of the individual parts of the EU thus threaten the very unity of the Union and thus British sovereignty.[4] On the other hand, sovereignty is being returned to the British government on a series of issues which, while causing political problems, are in fact difficult to manage in a way that is different from the European level and which are a major obstacle to the normal functioning of things. An example of the former is trade policy, which has been the most contentious issue in the negotiations, and which is difficult to decouple from the European level; while the latter is the prime example of immigration, which must be limited because of the obvious tensions, but without the guest worker system the British economy will be unworkable.[5]

The issue of sovereign foreign policy was also a problem. The sometimes unspoken, sometimes explicit legitimacy argument for Brexit was that Britain could finally be an independent player in world politics. Just as the Labour Party's slogan in the 1975 referendum on membership of the European Community was 'out and into the world', so decades later the Conservatives who supported Brexit believed that active engagement in the world and European foreign policy were incompatible. The aim was to open to Asian markets without the EU's complex regulations, to conclude new free trade agreements without the need to negotiate with the other twenty-seven member states, and to tighten trade and regulatory standards within the Commonwealth. So, a new British foreign and trade policy, independent of the EU, could have meant a freer, more capitalist and in some ways more 'Asian' approach to business and many more political and economic contacts outside Europe.[6]

But Brexit did not happen in a vacuum, but in a very turbulent and geopolitically active period of renewed competition between the great powers. Britain has been disproportionately affected by the Crown Jewel crisis, while its traditional historical ties have made it look to the United States rather than Asia. While the concept of global Britain had a strong theoretical basis, it actually focused from the outset on elements that were strong in traditional British politics and even in European discourse,[7] so that in many areas

there was no significant change (for example, in human rights policy or foreign aid), while in others it moved towards a more regulated, even rigid, stance (for example, on the challenge posed by Russia or China). The following sections of this paper examine the areas where the new British foreign policy has undergone significant changes between conceptualisation and implementation in relation to Brexit.

Great power rivalry between Beijing and Washington

For the past ten years, US-China relations have been defined by confrontation and power competition. The US-China rivalry is fundamentally a struggle between a relatively declining leading global power and an emerging challenger[8]. The trend since the Trump administration took office (a gradual deterioration in bilateral relations) cannot be seen as a radical reversal, but rather a change in the intensity, depth and nature of the confrontation compared to the previous period. The Trump administration, unlike previous US administrations, has clearly defined China as a strategic rival.[9] On the Chinese side, under President Xi Jinping, China has also pursued a more confrontational foreign policy than in the previous two decades, particularly in asserting its regional power interests, but has also shown no real willingness to compromise on its controversial economic policy practices (intellectual property, forced technology transfer, state subsidies, market restrictions).

The US-China great power competition is present in political, military, economic and communication dimensions. In the defence-military dimension, the following steps on the part of the United States are worth highlighting: the increase in the US defence budget since 2017, the concentration of US forces and certain military capabilities in the Pacific, the development of strategic weapons programmes, and the involvement of China in international agreements on strategic arms limitations.[10] Also on the Chinese side, the gradual expansion of the defence budget, the anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) armament programmes, the navy's priority development, aggressive naval-military actions (creation of artificial islands for military purposes) and manoeuvres in the East and South-East Asian region are worth highlighting.[11]

In the economic dimension, the Trump administration's goal vis-à-vis China is to reduce the US trade deficit, preserve the innovation and technological competitiveness of the US economy and reduce its dependence on China for industrial production. The Trump administration's strategy of economic decoupling is assessed as serving geopolitical (reducing dependence), economic (boosting US industry) and domestic (maintaining support for the lower middle class) goals. The Trump administration's objective is not only to progressively decouple the US and Chinese economies, but also to contain China's global economic and technological role, as marked by its crackdown on Chinese companies involved in 5G networks and the governments and market players that cooperate with them as foreign adversaries. In response, China is itself moving towards economic decoupling, with the elimination of its technological dependence on the United States as a key strategic objective, as marked by its 'Made in China 2025' programme.[12] The Trump administration's launching of a trade war against China was to be understood in this context; the January 2020 US-China agreement, which did not resolve the most fundamental issues of contention, is likely to reflect a transitional state. [13]

The coronavirus epidemic has added a new and very significant challenge to the list of controversial issues. There are international and domestic political considerations on both sides in the war of words over the origin of the virus and the causes of the epidemic. The degree of success or failure in dealing with the outbreak will obviously have a major impact on international perceptions of the respective powers in the coming years, and China seems to be in a better position in this respect.

However, beyond the communication warfare, an acute problem is the lack of strategic cooperation between the two countries as seen in previous major epidemics, including close coordination of medical research, mobilisation of health capacities and value chains, and coordination of international action. In the shadow of the economic and technological divergence that is likely to intensify as a result of the epidemic, there is also a risk of increased geopolitical competition, which will not only affect bilateral relations but will also have an impact on third countries and the international system as a whole. Indeed, the two great powers will become less and less tolerant of close cooperation between third countries and the other great power. Although in Europe the United States is cur-

rently in a better position to assert this political will, in other regions of the world, and in relations with many Asian and African countries, China is increasingly adopting a similar coercive attitude.

Case study: the AUKUS agreement as the cornerstone of global Britain

On 15 September 2021, the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia announced the AUKUS agreement, a series of collaborations in precision missile technology, quantum technology, "artificial intelligence" and cyber defence, and the provision of assistance to Australia to help the United States to deploy twelve nuclear-powered submarines. In doing so, Canberra unilaterally cancelled its existing contract with Paris, under which the French were to provide Australia with submarine capabilities with diesel-powered assets. The Canberra government first approached the British with this request, and London offered to mediate with Washington to make the cooperation a trilateral one. Under the AUKUS agreement, concluded during the G7 summit in Cornwall, the three Anglo-Saxon countries will work much more closely together in the future on global policy, and particularly in the Asia-Pacific. In a series of analyses, the Institute for Foreign Affairs and International Economics tries to analyse the new situation from three angles: regional policy, France and the Anglo-Saxon countries. The present analysis seeks to shed light on the perspective of the participating Anglo-Saxon countries, examining the defence, economic and political issues involved one by one.

For Washington, the AUKUS agreement was primarily about a change in the strategic environment: the US increasingly perceives China's regional influence, and especially its economic power and the Belt and Road Initiative, which is seen as a geopolitical megaproject, as a threat. US policy has been shy about the China challenge: under President Obama, a 'pivot to Asia' was contemplated without naming China, and under Donald Trump's administration, an 'Indo-Pacific Strategy'[14] was developed. The Indo-Pacific also implicitly addresses India as a potential member of a loose, anti-China grouping, as indicated by the "resurrection" of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, QUAD, in 2017, since India is part of the cooperation alongside the US, Japan and Australia. The concept of

"Indo-Pacific" was intended to achieve nothing less than an alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative: to create a network of subtle dependencies, which, however, point towards the US rather than China. However, early European analysts pointed out that the United States has neither the experience nor the will to deepen its relations with other countries through economic and international political means: Washington has always preferred to achieve its goals through security cooperation and favourable arms exports. President-elect Joe Biden, elected in November 2020, has made it a cornerstone of his foreign policy to breathe new life into America's alliance system and multilateral diplomacy. The new administration has promised a "top-to-bottom" strategic overhaul of China, but the competing ideas and political obstacles have led to a lack of a clear China strategy, while the general mood is one of a clear great power competition. Washington has found it particularly difficult to get the democratic countries of the Pacific 'in line' to 'contain' China and to demonstrate the American desire to see democratic countries more competitive than autocracies. However, Southeast Asian countries do not see Sino-US competition in a democracy/autocracy dichotomy, and so the traditional neutral stance of Southeast Asian countries makes US alliance-building difficult.[15] With the stalemate in the compensatory 'Indo-Pacific' alliance-building process, Joe Biden's administration has been forced to take action, especially in the wake of the PR-disaster like withdrawal from Afghanistan and the president's plummeting popularity at the end of the summer.

The September 15 date of the AUKUS announcement by the US can therefore be explained primarily in this context. The United States had to demonstrate that it had the initiative in the global international arena and could provide innovative responses to the Chinese assertion of influence, which was seen as a challenge. In addition, the creation of AUKUS sends a clear message that certain countries are "not threatened by the Afghanistan scenario", i.e. Washington will not abandon its allies.[16] From the US perspective, however, the AUKUS does not represent a major change in the strategic landscape: although the signing of the AUKUS will undoubtedly remove Australia's "strategic uncertainty", i.e. Canberra will clearly align itself behind Washington, the South Sea country was already considered the most stable ally of the US. The eight new submarines are not a significant strategic advantage over the Chinese navy, which has some 80 submarines. The most important

difference[17] between diesel and nuclear submarines is the amount of time they can spend below the surface; for the latter, this depends almost entirely on the amount of food they can carry and the psychological state of their crews. This is important because it allows the previously typical 11-day dive time for Australian submarines to be extended to 77 days, which may be essential for intelligence gathering missions in the South China Sea, which already take around 11 days to make the round trip. The doubled dive time is therefore primarily useful for intelligence purposes. For the Americans, who already have several nuclear submarines cruising in the region, this is not strategically significant. What may be significant in defence policy terms is to bring the British-Australian-American alliance into the 21st century by strengthening interoperability and sharing Washington's best-kept secrets in AUKUS: Australia is the first country with which the US has shared nuclear technology since the 1958 Mutual Defence Treaty with the UK. In addition, the US can station strategic bombers on Australian soil. It can be seen, therefore, that strategically, pooling resources and technology and 'federalising' the defence sector may be the sensible long-term goal - to the extent that the sovereignty-sensitive Americans are able to achieve it.

In economic policy terms, the Australian deal is not a decisive one for the US. Although the construction of eight submarines is profitable in principle, it should be added that US companies would have been major suppliers of the original French production and would have supplied the submarine weapon systems in their entirety. Of course, the eight submarines of the new AUKUS agreement are more expensive than those undertaken by the French Naval Group, and while this does not weigh much on the complex US defence industry, it is politically well communicated to a presidency that is prioritising the welfare of the suddenly valuable 'American worker'. But more importantly, AUKUS should strengthen the three countries' joint investments in various high-tech sectors, such as precision missile technology, the development of 'artificial intelligence' and quantum technology. These are obviously slow-starting economic relationships that will take decades to develop, but they are undoubtedly already pointing in a certain direction, and it is indeed a logical step to invest in high-tech after the shock of Covid-19, with state support and possibly multi-state cooperation. It is, however, too early to say whether this will pay off, especially as it is precisely in these areas that fierce competition between the

major powers seems to be emerging, with the focus on setting different standards while limiting each other. An incompatible standard or a dead-end technological development can cause a major backlog, as has already happened in the case of 5G. All this just means that a bold economic initiative becomes potentially fragile for the future precisely because of the action against China.

So, while it does little to change the overall concrete strategic picture, AUKUS undoubtedly has long-term potential benefits, mainly in terms of intelligence, potential "federalisation" of defence industries, and the political capital of strengthening US engagement. However, it was evident early on that the AUKUS was creating more of a scandal than was expected in any Anglo-Saxon capital. France feels that it was not informed of the termination of the Franco-Australian treaty. The Australians and Americans have suggested that the French were aware of the new set-up, but Joe Biden admitted at the G20 summit in Rome that the unilateral announcement was a "clumsy" move. Today only Canberra maintains that the French were informed in good time, but the facts do not really show that there was direct communication. Paris has recalled its ambassador to Canberra and Washington for consultations (the first time in the history of bilateral relations) and, although tensions have since been largely defused, the European Union must acknowledge that, even collectively, it is a second-tier power on global issues. Alongside the EU, tensions have also emerged in NATO, where France and EU countries, alongside the Anglo-American tandem, have taken a different view. Although tensions have largely eased since September, it is certainly an interesting turn of events that the Americans have 'come to terms' with the EU's French-inspired concept of 'strategic autonomy', potentially implying that they accept a more autonomous regional middle power role alongside a diminishing global role for the EU. Furthermore, the perception of AUKUS in the Asia-Pacific is not clear: in many Asian countries, the closer cooperation of 'white' Anglo-Saxon countries in a region where their presence is a consequence of a thousand times cursed colonialism has bad connotations. The transfer of nuclear know-how in the agreement also harbours a colonialist sentiment: some countries share technology even at the cost of breaking the NPT, because they are 'responsible', while for others this would no longer be acceptable. The AUKUS could therefore provoke resentment from countries with a non-

white political identity, and thus 'double-speed' the American understanding of the Indo-Pacific, in a sense dividing and narrowing it. In addition, AUKUS underlines once again that US alliance-building in the region will always remain militarised and thus cannot provide an economic counterweight to China for the politically and defensively disengaged countries of the region.

The international policy of the great southern continent is spectacularly shaped by its geographical location and geography. Large, predominantly barren and sparsely populated, Australia is also dependent on imports for basic foodstuffs, and is therefore perhaps the most dependent of all countries in the world on maintaining the security of its maritime transport. Its small population, vast coastline and length of sea routes require it to maintain close ties with the region's maritime powers: until 1942 this meant Britain and since then the United States. But Australia is doubly dependent[18] on the United States for defence and economically on its largest trading partner, China. Situated between neighbours with different cultures and states, Australia has always maintained a delicate balance in this dual dependency, until Scott Morrison's premiership and the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, when Sino-Australian relations went into a downward spiral.[19]

On the Australian side, the primary reason for joining AUKUS is the wobbling popularity of the Morrison government, which was perpetuated by political communication scandals related to the bushfires at the end of 2019. While it is true that the epidemic management, which was perceived as good by the population, improved its image, the advantage it gained in spring 2020 has since evaporated and it has even suffered an electoral defeat. The new type of coronavirus outbreak was both an opportunity and a threat for the Canberra government: when the Prime Minister called for an international inquiry into the origin of the coronavirus in late April 2020, he was raising an idea that paid off in Australian domestic politics, but he probably did not expect it to provoke such a backlash from China. Since then, Sino-Australian relations have hit rock bottom, with Beijing essentially keeping Canberra in a 'diplomatic freeze' and seeking to embarrass the country economically. While New Zealand has pursued a similar policy to Australia on 5G networks, and has similarly called for an international commission of inquiry, it has not soured its relationship with China. The reason is that for China, the Australia issue is also a symbolic one: the Australian government's actions are seen by China as a diplomatic

insult and Australia's choice on the issue of dual dependence could be seen as a model for other countries. As the Australians often say of themselves, they are the "canary in the coal mine", meaning that things are happening "before" in the southern hemisphere, and thus setting an example for others.

The deterioration in relations with China is out of control, and is already beyond the Australian government, and can be understood in the context of global Sino-US rivalry. For Canberra, therefore, it has been partly a forced trajectory to make a grand, spectacular gesture to identify itself as a still more powerful player in the rivalry in the international arena. At the same time, it was argued that Australia really needed nuclear-powered submarines to help it in its most important peacetime task of reconnaissance, and that other co-benefits were important. For Canberra, Tomahawk cruise missiles are an important defence acquisition, and perhaps more importantly, closer high-tech defence industrial cooperation than before. Perhaps most importantly, however, the Morrison government seems to have a grand strategy for Australia, and to be able to articulate it decisively in concert with other major powers.

But this will not only increase Australia's defence and industrial capacity. Many have suggested that the production of nuclear submarines, even if they take place on the southern continent, could jeopardise the livelihoods of Adelaide workers, while jobs in the high-tech sector could take years, if not decades, to be created. The most comprehensive critique of AUKUS was certainly offered by Professor Hugh White, who pointed out that the first nuclear submarine will not be operational until 2040, and that in the 2030s the Australian naval capability will be much weaker precisely because of AUKUS; and that there is a lack of knowledge and experience of nuclear propulsion technology in Australia, as there is no precedent of a nuclear power sharing such technology with anyone since 1946. Maintaining and operating such a technology is a huge task, both technologically and in terms of human resources, and will require a complete rethink of the Australian defence industry. White says that China's power must be co-existed with, Australia must be equipped for continental defence and must not depend any more than it does now on the not always reliable commitment of the United States.

Many point out that the AUKUS is also partly a forced track due to China's trade coercive measures. It was not a good sign, however, that at the press conference announcing AUKUS, US President Joe

Biden seemed to forget Scott Morrison's name[20] and at one point referred to him only as "Thank you, Boris. And thank you in the same way to your mate down there". In an Anglo-Saxon context, such insider language is certainly not blatant, but the Australian press did not take it as a good sign, especially when Hugh White said that AUKUS could end Australia's sovereign foreign policy. Former Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating accused the Morrison government of the same thing: selling out Australia's 'strategic autonomy'. Although Keating has criticised his own party colleagues who are largely supportive of AUKUS, and there is now considerable public support for a closer US alliance, a stronger commitment to the US could ultimately end the traditionally consensual nature of Australian foreign policy.

While the US and Australian roles in AUKUS are clear, it is much less clear what role the UK is expected to play. This may be one reason why Britain has suffered the least from the diplomatic scandal of establishing the cooperation. French Defence Minister Le Drian, while criticising the other two powers, was reticent to say that London had acted with "the usual opportunism"[21] on the issue, essentially acting as a go-between. Although France has summoned its ambassadors in Washington and Canberra for consultations, unprecedented in the past, it has not summoned the ambassador in London. Neither the French nor the Chinese directly attacked London, while Canberra and Washington received a good deal of the diplomatic outcry. So they suffered far fewer losses, but the question remains whether Britain has a relevant role to play and what it stands to gain from AUKUS.

Britain will finally formally leave the European Union on 31 January 2020, and the current Tory government in Whitehall has staked its political capital partly on whether it can manage Brexit while addressing the economic problems it will cause, and whether it can give Britain a new global vision. This included the Integrated Strategic Review of March 2021, which identifies as priorities for British foreign policy those areas where the former imperial traditions still exist and fit into London's global role. Thus, the Anglo-American special relationship, the relationship with East Asia, even Hong Kong, or Australia, is much more important than traditional European issues. In the wake of Brexit, the notion of the 'Anglosphere' has also become increasingly prominent in British public life, as Britons, wary of an over-bureaucratised European Union, point out that common action is only possible if there is a common

identity, and while this seems increasingly remote for the EU, for the Anglo-Saxon countries it is a given. What is missing for 'global Britain', therefore, is the strengthening of economic ties with countries outside Europe,[22] military cooperation and trust with the Anglo-Saxon countries is at a fairly high level.

AUKUS is therefore a logical step towards a "global Britain". For London, perhaps the clearest victory is a symbolic one: post-Brexit Britain is a success story, as it regains a greater role in the Asia-Pacific fifty-four years after the empire gave up its position "East of the Suez". The timing of the announcement may also be significant, as the President of the European Commission presented the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy the following day, which, unlike AUKUS, has barely made the news. A further disadvantage for the EU is that the next round of EU-Australia free trade negotiations, which have been postponed due to the Franco-Australian dispute, are currently underway. Meanwhile, UK-Australian negotiations have continued and the first post-Brexit FTA with Australia was concluded in mid-December.

So far, the cooperation papers do not specify whether the nuclear-powered submarines will be British or American models, but many people think the American model will be the frontrunner. However, there is some question as to whether the US would actually put its latest technology at the disposal of the Australians. Moreover, US manufacturing capacity is already tied up for decades in advance and[23] Canberra could need smaller equipment than the US. Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) Director Peter Jennings says the UK has a major role to play in AUKUS, but argues for the procurement of Virginia-class US submarines. Euan Graham, however, is pushing[24] for British Astute-class aircraft, if only because closer British-Australian cooperation could balance the US side. And Washington may be inclined either to maximise profits or to revert to a transactional approach to foreign policy - even under a second Trump administration. Of course, technological cooperation with the US, which has huge investment and scientific potential, and with Australia, which is equally advanced and rich in resources for high-tech industry, is also of crucial importance for Britain. But perhaps more importantly, if Australia ends up ordering British submarines, this could create jobs, particularly in Scotland and the north of England, where the London government is keen to invest and which also have important political

support, as several districts voted Tory in 2019 but are not seen as stable strongholds of government.

The contract is also strategically important for Britain, as whoever builds the submarines will certainly gain an extended stationing capability in Australia and its dependent territories, essentially extending the British presence in the Pacific.[25] Others also point to the dangers of such close defence cooperation, which could rightly be seen as an implicit security guarantee, and Britain, which is about to take back its global role, but is essentially a European welfare state, may not be prepared to find itself in a Sino-Australian conflict in the event of escalation, with little primary interest beyond ensuring the security of maritime trade and undersea cables. However, defence agreements are primarily for peacetime, and it seems that one of the main aims of the AUKUS, the revival of the defence industry, is already underway. Two days after the conclusion of the AUKUS agreement, BAE Systems and Rolls-Royce received government orders to design new nuclear-powered submarines for the British Royal Navy. The British government reckons that not only workers in the north of England would benefit, but the whole defence industry, and later the high-tech sectors.

It is very important for the British government to emphasise these achievements, especially at a time when the British economy has shrunk by the biggest amount since the Great Frost of 1707, the Covid-19 pandemic[26] and a series of prime ministers have fallen since 2021. One of the biggest successes of the Boris Johnson-led UK government has been the consistent push through of Brexit, which has seen the Tories win the 2019 election with a majority not seen since Margaret Thatcher's victory in 1987. For London, therefore, AUKUS has posed few diplomatic problems, with the greatest gains and the least risk in the defence field, and only positive results in economic and domestic policy. Economically, the only disturbing factor is that one of the basic tenets of the case for Brexit was that the British economy could be transformed to a kind of "Singapore model" outside the European Union, with greater freedom and less regulation, and better linking the island nation to emerging Asian markets. However, the question is how compatible this distinctly Anglo-Saxon cooperation is with gaining a position in Asian markets - although this is undoubtedly a longer-term issue.

British politics in Europe and the world since Brexit

The key principle that drove the political forces that voted for, and supported Brexit was the defence of sovereignty. In British political life, sovereignty is a key concept and covers much more than the same word in continental Europe. On the one hand, in the political tradition of the country, it is not the people but the parliament that is sovereign, and this 'parliamentary sovereignty' is one and indivisible, i.e. it is rather difficult to 'pool', which is a well-established and researched operating principle of the European Union, and which has its reflections not only in integration theory but also in Hungarian political theory.[27] It is very difficult to reconcile British sovereignty with the normative goal of an ever-closer Union in the European Union's main policy documents, or with the fact that the European Parliament is depriving the British Parliament of the possibility of ever more sovereign decisions at the normative level and the European institutions are depriving the British Parliament of the possibility of ever more sovereign decisions in practice.[28]

How to make use of this restored sovereignty to formulate an independent British policy is by and large the most important question of current British politics. As we have seen above, the UK's global policy has not lived up to expectations. Although it has forged closer relations with some countries with an 'Anglo-Saxon culture', notably the United States and Australia, the contentious points of the AUKUS agreement and the negotiations with the EU have deepened the conflict with important European allies, notably France. Similar problems have arisen with other elements of sovereignty, such as education policy, which is independent of the normative recommendations of the European Union, or the migration issue. Regarding the former, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has made it one of his main objectives to halt the decline of British education and would therefore strengthen education, particularly in mathematics and English, and introduce a major examination in these subjects, similar to the A-levels. Despite this being a sovereign right of the UK Department for Education, the conditions are not in place logistically, in terms of the necessary support or the legal environment, and more than a year after he took office, the matter has not progressed. In October 2023, 10 Downing Street said they would not be ready to implement reform for "another decade".[29]

Much the same fate has befallen the 'Rwanda Plan', which would see illegal immigrants and ineligible asylum seekers granted resettlement in the genuinely peaceful and relatively prosperous East African country under a bilateral treaty between Rwanda and the UK. While this plan would seem to solve at least part of the migratory pressure on Britain, it does not consider the fact that asylum seekers want to come to a European welfare country, not just a peaceful third country, nor does it take into account the importance of the diaspora, of existing relationships. In short, while it appears to offer a viable alternative for migrants, it severely restricts their right to freedom of choice. It is also not really in keeping with the spirit of British law and other international obligations that Britain has undertaken. The 'Rwanda Plan' and Prime Minister Sunak's proposals during the Covid-19 pandemic were still causing serious headaches and even threatening political downfall at the end of 2023.[30]

The war on sovereign policy choices comes in a general domestic political context where the Tories' leadership is under serious threat for the first time since 2010. According to the latest polls, the number of seats held by the Conservative Party in an upcoming election could fall to 175 from the 365 held in 2019. The Guardian's assessment points out not only this, but also that the remainder of the Conservatives could increasingly come from the radical right, further polarising British domestic politics. This in turn could create a domestic political context in which the failure of the pro-sovereignty Conservative policy could be replaced by an even more vocal advocacy of that policy.[31] In this context, the Conservatives' most important political asset ahead of the elections could be precisely if they can finally succeed in pushing through their strong, right-wing inspired and multi-problem propositions, and thus regain credibility with the voters who still gave them a historic mandate in 2019. The alternative to this is a Labour government, itself divided between a progressive-urban and a traditional-working-class electorate, which an increasingly narrow but increasingly radical Conservative parliamentary opposition is trying to politicise.

The British European policy tradition

Before Britain joined the European Union in 1973, it was one of the five great European powers since the end of the 17th century.

These five powers, which were the most important five powers in the international system of the world as it was then known, are also known as the pentarchy. Britain was the only island in this five-power configuration, with all the other great powers lying on the continent: France, the Habsburg Empire, Prussia and Russia. In this system, Great Britain always tried to maintain a balance, which was not so easy, as the continental powers were constantly changing and shifting towards each other. In this system, alliances always had to be forged in such a way as to restore the balance of power.32

Henry Kissinger, in his major work Diplomacy, points out that William of Orange, who came to power in the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688, was the main advocate of the balance of power policy. His views, which were not only well suited to the British tradition but also gave it new content, later became the foundations of the balance of power policy. (It is an interesting paradox that the continental balance of power policy was treated almost as an aesthetic issue by the British political elite of the time, while British supremacy at sea did not disturb anyone's sense of 'beauty'.)

So Britain always had to ally itself with the state or alliance that had just proved "weaker" in the great continental wars - the War of the Spanish Succession, the War of the Austrian Succession, the Seven Years' War, etc. While this policy was successful in the 18th century, and British power was growing overseas, it posed a serious challenge in the early 19th century and twice in the 20th century. During the Napoleonic Wars and the two world wars, France and Germany came closer to establishing continental hegemony and thus to posing a direct threat to vital British interests.[33] And Hungarian-American historian John Lukacs points out that the Americans actually adopted the British interpretation of the balance of power policy. The US opted for a Germany First war plan - i.e. a war plan with the primary objective of defeating Germany - at the end of 1941 because it accepted the British premise that a European continental hegemon could challenge the dominance of the dominant maritime power - which was then in the hands of the United States rather than Britain.[34]

The most likely scenario is that, after the post-Brexit pathfinder, as European integration has indeed intensified after the British exit, Britain will return to the policies that led to the maintenance of the continent's balance of power. As it exited the integrationist organisation, there is very little other tradition to return to, as the

British either played a leading role (1815-1822, 1919, 1940-1946), participated in integration (1973-2020), or played this balancing role. Some commentators have already pointed out that this balancing act is a fundamental interest of British policy, and thus essentially a division of the countries of the European Union.[35] In addition, Britain can only offer greater resistance to the combined foreign policy and trade policy forces if it is able to use European forces against each other, a move dictated not only by its political tradition but also by its fundamental interests. This will not be reflected in strategic documents, but it becomes clear when we take stock of British policy and its motivations.

The main British policy interests in relation to the European continent in the early 2020s can be summarised in the following points:

- Supporting Ukraine in its war with Russia (indeed, leading this international support)
- normalised trade relations with the EU
- developing a special relationship with geopolitically enhanced Poland and the Baltic States
- enter the EU energy market with small modular nuclear reactors and wind power from wind farms in the North Sea
- maintain the UK's information economy advantage over its European competitors
- maintaining stability in the Western Balkans with the help of British peacekeeping forces
- maintain a better security relationship with the US than the rest of Europe, and seek a leading role within NATO

It can be seen that, at most points, the attempt to divide Europe can be found as an abstract organizing principle. Not only on obvious points, such as access to the energy market or achieving a leading role in NATO, but also on more abstract points, this British intention is evident. The latter are characterised, for example, by the support for Ukraine and the attack on the Nord Stream II pipeline, which has made Europe much more exposed to Anglo-Saxon energy imports, a clear British interest, even if we do not talk about the longer-term competitiveness gap that could be created on the European continent. Similarly, the maintenance of stability in the

Western Balkans, not only to counter the influence of Russia and Turkey, but also to prevent the region from falling completely into the EU's (and Germany's, most notably) freedom, while occupying a significant position in the traditionally British waters of the Eastern Mediterranean, is also of relevance.

BRITISH-HUNGARIAN POLITICAL RELATIONS

Brexit has changed Britain's relationship with the European Union and has made it necessary to rethink its international partnerships and foreign policy. Hungary has also become an international partner that is important to them as an EU member state, with a complex set of political relationships with the EU as an institution and with individual member states. We now look at the post-Brexit political relationship between Britain and Hungary, highlighting the challenges and opportunities that the new era presents.

Before going into the post-Brexit situation, it is essential to understand the historical background of British-Hungarian political relations. Although the two countries are geographically distant from each other, their relationship is based on different historical and geopolitical factors. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the British Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Empire were two major European powers. Their historical paths crossed in diplomatic negotiations, trade and cultural relations. However, the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire after the First World War significantly changed the dynamics of the region and the political landscape of Hungary.[36]

The Cold War further shaped British-Hungarian relations, as both countries were members of opposing blocs. Britain played an important role in NATO, while Hungary identified with the Eastern Bloc led by the Soviet Union. With the end of the Cold War, Hungary turned towards democracy and market-oriented reforms, which eventually led to its accession to the EU in 2004. This brought about a significant change in Hungary's foreign policy, creating a closer relationship with Western Europe.

The European Union has played a central role in shaping Hungary's foreign policy, economic integration and political position. Hungary was a beneficiary of EU funding and sought to reconcile its national interests with the obligations of EU membership. At the same time, tensions have also arisen within the EU, particularly over democratic governance, the rule of law and migration.

Brexit also marked a turning point in British-Hungarian relations within the EU. Britain's decision to leave the EU has brought uncertainty and raised questions about the future of the Union. It has also created challenges and opportunities in British-Hungarian political relations.

As a small state, Hungary is Eurosceptic in a different way to Britain. For Budapest, the preservation of the EU is of the utmost importance, which is why, in defending European values, it is trying to remind its partners that the key to the survival of the organisation is to return to its original mission, the conservative, intergovernmental, Europe of Nations idea. In this framework, Hungary is broadly in favour of integration, but rejects the idea of further federalisation, or at least views it with a critical, reserved attitude. The British, on the other hand, saw the issue differently, as net contributors they were most concerned with influence over decisions (see the 'get back control' campaign) and control over key areas such as immigration and trade negotiations with global partners. With the exit they have regained control of these areas and are now seeking to normalise their relationship with the EU ("associate membership"?). But at the cost of not having a say in joint decisions, Hungary has lost a conservative, thoughtful ally in the debate on federalism and its future in Europe.

After Brexit, both the UK and Hungary can negotiate bilateral trade agreements tailored to their specific needs. This greater flexibility creates the opportunity to tailor economic cooperation, potentially benefiting industries in both countries. Despite differing positions within the EU, the UK and Hungary share common interests on global challenges such as climate change, security issues and the fight against terrorism. Joint efforts on these issues can be a bridge to building positive relations. Both countries have the opportunity for diplomatic dialogue to address common concerns. These discussions may include talks on regional stability, conflict resolution and responses to international crises.

The post-Brexit period has brought a new and evolving chapter in British-Hungarian political relations. While challenges arise from divergent EU interests, trade disruption and conflicts over values, opportunities also exist to build a more complex and dynamic relationship. Bilateral trade agreements, cultural exchanges, cooperation on global challenges and diplomatic dialogue can all contribute to both countries successfully adapting to the changing geopolitical environment. The historical and strategic

links between Britain and Hungary can provide a basis for strengthening their relationship in this new chapter. As both countries adapt to the realities of a post-Brexit Europe, seizing these opportunities and addressing the challenges will play a crucial role in shaping the future of their political relationship.

THE IMPACT OF BREXIT ON EUROPEAN CONSERVATISM

Brexit, the decision of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union, has had serious and far-reaching consequences, not only for the United Kingdom, but for Europe as a whole. One of the major areas where Brexit has had a significant impact is in European conservatism. There are a number of conservative parties and movements in the European Union, each with their own unique priorities and perspectives. In this essay, we provide an analysis of the impact of Brexit on European conservatism, exploring the changing dynamics, challenges and opportunities that have emerged in the post-Brexit environment.

European conservatism is a diverse and multifaceted political landscape, encompassing many parties, movements and ideologies. Although conservative parties differ across European countries, they often share common values, such as limiting state interference in the economy, promoting traditional family values and strengthening national sovereignty.

European conservative parties have traditionally been an important part of the political spectrum. They have played a role both in national governments and in the European Parliament, contributing to various policy debates, including economic policy, social issues and the EU's role in global affairs. But Brexit has brought a new dimension to this landscape, reshaping the dynamics and priorities of European conservatism.

The most direct impact of Brexit on European conservatism has been an increase in Euroscepticism. The success of the Brexit campaign in the UK has led to a resurgence of Eurosceptic movements and groups within European conservative parties. These Eurosceptic actors have eroded the traditionally pro-EU stance of conservative parties. European conservative parties (e.g. the EPP parties) are facing internal divisions as their leaders have to cope with competing demands from pro-EU and Eurosceptic factions.

European conservatives face economic uncertainty as a result of Brexit. The UK's exit from the EU single market and customs union has upended existing trade patterns, affecting European businesses and the wider economic landscape. Conservative politicians need to devise a strategy to deal with the economic consequences of Brexit that mitigates the negative effects of the UK's departure while ensuring the stability of the European economy.

Brexit is forcing European conservative parties to rethink their political alliances. The departure of the UK, traditionally an influential EU member, has changed the balance of power and priorities within the Union. European conservatives have to adapt to this new situation, which often means redesigning their foreign policy and trade strategy to take account of the UK's absence.

Brexit has intensified the debate between nationalist and internationalist actors within European conservatism. Nationalist conservatives argue that the focus should be on the sovereignty of individual countries, their borders and the management of immigration policy, while internationalist conservatives support cooperation within the EU and insist on supranational governance. This ideological tension has created ideological fissures, and conservative leaders must find a balance together or risk alienating an important faction.

Brexit also has implications for European security and defence. The UK, as a major military power, has traditionally played a key role in European security initiatives. The UK's departure will lead to a reassessment of the defence capabilities in question and of past cooperation. European conservatives need to address questions about collective defence and the role of EU institutions.

BRITISH-HUNGARIAN ECONOMIC AND TRADE RELATIONS

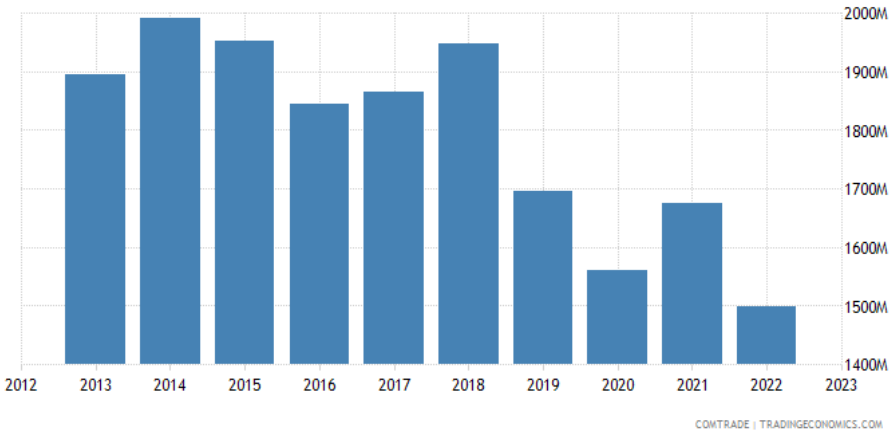
After Brexit, the UK has redefined its relations with the world, including its European neighbours, and Hungarian-British economic relations have experienced a series of changes. In what follows, we analyse Hungarian-British economic relations post-Brexit, with a particular focus on trade, public investment, and the challenges and opportunities that have emerged post-Brexit.

In order to understand the dynamics of Hungarian-British economic relations post-Brexit, it is important to consider the historical context. The UK has always had a strong economic presence in

Europe, both as a member of the EU and through various trade agreements. As a member of the EU, the development of Hungarian-British economic relations has been facilitated by a single market with identical trade rules.

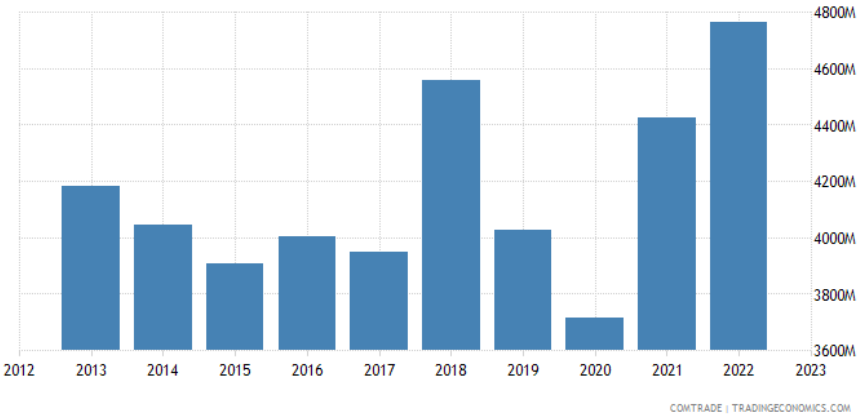
Hungarian-British trade relations have a long history, with the UK serving as an important trading partner for Hungary within the EU. The UK has always been an important destination for Hungarian exports, particularly of industrial equipment, vehicles and agricultural products. In return, Hungary has also imported a variety of goods from the UK, including machinery, pharmaceuticals and vehicles.

The tables below show export-import data for the two countries.



1. Figure: UK exports to Hungary 2012-2022.[37]

As you can see, immediately after Brexit, British exports to Hungary plummeted in 2020, but in 2021 they rebounded.



2. Figure: Hungary's exports to the United Kingdom 2012-2022[38]

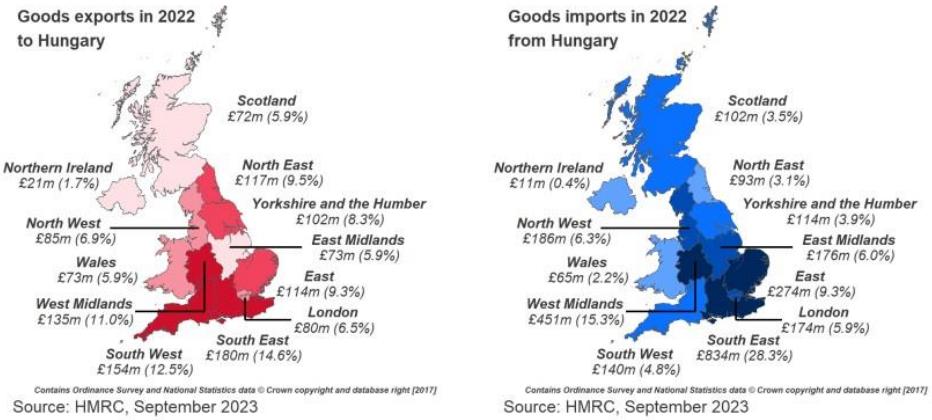
The graph below shows that although Hungarian exports also fell significantly in 2020, in the following two years they exceeded

the levels of the previous decades. Overall, in terms of the balance of export-import indicators, the UK is in deficit in terms of bilateral trade, as shown in the table below.

Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Value of total trade	5.1	5.0	5.2	5.7	6.2	6.1	6.5	5.8	5.6	6.9
Value of exports	1.8	1.8	1.9	2.1	2.3	2.3	2.4	2.5	2.5	2.9
Value of imports	3.3	3.1	3.3	3.6	3.9	3.8	4.2	3.3	3.1	4.0
Trade balance	-1.5	-1.3	-1.3	-1.5	-1.6	-1.6	-1.8	-0.9	-0.6	-1.1

3. Figure: British-Hungarian trade balance 2013-2022[39]

The intensity of the export-import relationship varies across the British Isles. Not surprisingly, the capital and the London area stand out.



4. Figure: Regional distribution of Hungarian export-import in the British Isles[40]

Brexit has brought a significant change to these relations, requiring new strategies and frameworks to continue working together and maintain the stable trading relationship that both countries have benefited from in the past.

The UK's exit from the EU single market meant that they no longer had common trade agreements and rules for everyone, and these had to be worked out. As a result, they had to renegotiate the terms of trade between Hungary and the UK, which created new barriers to trade, including customs inspections, tariffs and other non-tariff barriers of a minor or major nature.

CUSTOMS DUTIES AND OTHER BARRIERS TO TRADE

One of the biggest challenges Brexit has brought to Hungarian-British economic relations has been the introduction of new tariffs

and non-tariff barriers. Hungary and the UK enjoyed tariff-free trade as members of the EU. However, the UK's exit required new trade terms to be developed. Although both countries tried to minimise trade barriers, it was impossible to eliminate them completely. Hungarian exporters now face the additional costs of tariffs and customs documentation procedures, which have affected the competitiveness of their products on the UK market.

Another challenge in post-Brexit trade relations has been regulatory differences. The UK set its own regulatory standards, which meant that Hungarian exporters had to comply with two different sets of regulations: both EU and UK standards. This required extra effort to comply with both, and often meant that Hungarian businesses had to invest in improving their trading practices to meet UK standards as well.

Brexit has also contributed to disruptions in supply chains, as Hungarian businesses using just-in-time delivery models have faced delays due to customs checks and new documentation requirements. The automotive and manufacturing sectors have been significantly affected, as they were previously highly integrated into European supply chains.

Despite these challenges, it is important to note that Hungarian trade with the UK has proved resilient. Hungary has maintained its exports to the UK, although the complexity and costs involved have increased. The UK remains an important trading partner for Hungary, and both countries have actively sought to mitigate the negative effects of Brexit on their economic relations.

Investment and trade relations

Besides trade, investment is also an important aspect of Hungarian-British economic relations. Both countries have a presence in each other's territory, for example British companies operate in Hungary and Hungarian companies in the UK. British companies have a significant presence in Hungary, particularly in the financial, energy and telecommunications sectors. After Brexit, these companies have had to assess the economic impact of the exit on their activities in Hungary. Some British companies have considered relocating certain functions or offices to other EU Member States in order to maintain access to the common market, which could also have a positive impact on the Hungarian labour market.

Hungarian companies have also invested in the UK, particularly in manufacturing, pharmaceuticals and technology. Uncertainty around Brexit, particularly trade and regulatory changes, has forced some Hungarian investors to reconsider their investments in the UK. However, others saw an opportunity in the UK's new regulatory environment and hoped that bilateral economic relations would flourish as a result.

Although Brexit has brought many challenges to Hungarian-British economic relations, it has also created new opportunities. Long-term negotiations and continued uncertainty about the UK's future trade arrangements have posed significant challenges for the business sector. The lack of clear direction has made it difficult for businesses to plan their operations. Customs inspections and the imposition of duties have led to increasing costs for Hungarian exporters. These additional costs have reduced their competitiveness in the UK market. Complying with two different sets of regulations - EU and UK standards - has added complexity and costs for businesses trading across borders.

After Brexit, the UK started to develop its own bilateral trade agreements with countries outside the EU. Hungary and the UK had the opportunity to establish a new, unique trade agreement. The UK's ability to set its own regulatory standards gave Hungarian businesses the opportunity to adapt their products and services more easily to the UK market, potentially increasing their chances of accessing the market. Hungarian companies have been encouraged to diversify their export destinations and reduce over-reliance on the UK market. This diversification could lead to new business opportunities in other regions. After Brexit, both Hungary and the UK have taken steps to strengthen their economic ties through trade and investment agreements. Hungary and the UK have launched negotiations on a bilateral trade agreement aimed at minimising trade barriers and strengthening economic cooperation. The Hungarian government recognised the importance of maintaining access to the UK market and sought to protect the interests of Hungarian businesses exporting to the UK.

Both countries have also actively promoted investment relations. Hungary sought to attract companies from the UK, which in turn wanted to establish an EU presence. Budapest emphasised the country's good strategic location, skilled workforce and favourable business environment. Similarly, the British have sought to

attract foreign investment to the UK, including Hungarian investors, who have been offered discounts and support. In addition to broader trade and investment agreements, both countries have launched sector-specific cooperation. These included areas such as renewable energy, technology and research and development, where mutual benefits were sought based on shared interests and exchanges of expertise.

British FDI in Hungary between 2017 and 2022 was significantly lower than before the Brexit negotiations started, falling from around €2,500 million in 2016 to €1,000 million in 2022, then to €500 million before rising again, and exceeding €3,600 million in 2022. Detailed data can be found in the MNB statement.[41] Hungarian working capital is significantly lower than in the UK, ranging between €80 billion and €140 billion between 2017 and 2020, but only €40 billion in 2021. The figures for 2022 are more encouraging, when it will again reach its highest level ever at €140 billion.[42]

Total trade in goods and services (exports plus imports) between the UK and Hungary was £7.6 billion in the four quarters to the end of the second quarter of 2023, up by 19.0% at current prices, or £1.2 billion, compared with the four quarters to the end of the second quarter of 2022.[43] Hungary was the UK's 36th most traded partner in the four quarters ending Q2 2023, accounting for 0.4% of total UK trade.[44]

LABOUR MARKET MIGRATION

Nowadays, emigration from Hungary is one of the most serious social problems, and a significant proportion of workers have chosen Britain as their destination country, where before Brexit immigration was essentially unhindered by EU common rules, or at least very few conditions had to be met to be able to work in this other EU country. After Brexit, this has changed significantly, and there are now a number of legal and technical hurdles to overcome if a Hungarian citizen wants to work in the UK. The main reason for this is, of course, that the success of the Brexit campaign itself depended to a large extent on the political elite's promise to curb uncontrolled immigration. Nevertheless, the influx of foreign labour remains important for the British people, so the need to regain control has not necessarily meant that the demand for the labour of, for example, Hungarian or other Eastern European immigrants

has disappeared. The situation of Hungarians settled in the country before the exit was also settled. However, EU citizens who have legally and habitually settled in the UK by the end of 2020, the end of the 11-month transition period that began after the UK's Brexit, will be able to remain in the country with all their acquired rights, but will need to apply for an indefinite residence permit - officially known as EU Settled Status - which will be valid until 31 December 2022.[45]

From 2010 to 2015, the number of Hungarians emigrating to the UK showed an increasing trend, but from 2015 onwards this curve started to decline, and then from 2020 onwards it started to increase again, although it did not reach the level of around 2017. [46] The number of foreign migrants from the UK has been relatively stable, averaging between 300 and 400, except for two years when the number rose to over 500. Compared to the largest European immigrant nation, the Germans, at 4,000 per year[47], this is modest, although slightly higher than the French immigration of around 400 per year.

Hungarian-British economic relations have faced several challenges and uncertainties after Brexit, but it has also created opportunities for closer cooperation and more flexible trade and investment agreements. Past trade and investment relations between the two countries have continued to withstand the challenges posed by Brexit. Hungary and the United Kingdom have actively sought to mitigate the negative effects of Brexit by negotiating trade agreements and promoting investment.

The future of Hungarian-British economic relations is likely to depend on the willingness of both countries to adapt to changing circumstances and take advantage of new opportunities. The development of a comprehensive bilateral trade agreement will be a key step to further strengthen and grow the economic partnership. In this changing environment, the ability of businesses in both countries to manage regulatory divergences and supply chain challenges will play a crucial role in determining the long-term success of the Hungarian-British economic relationship post-Brexit.

HUNGARIAN-BRITISH DEFENCE AND MILITARY RELATIONS

Brexit has also undoubtedly triggered a profound shift in the geopolitical map of Europe, not only in economic and trade relations. In this paradigm shift, the area of defence and security cooperation stands out.

The roots of Hungarian-British defence cooperation go beyond the European Union, especially in the field of the NATO alliance, which Hungary joined in 1999. Over the years, both nations have participated in joint military exercises, peacekeeping missions and various security initiatives. However, the dramatic consequences of Brexit have led to a reassessment of existing partnerships, urging the two countries to redefine the parameters of their defence cooperation.

The primary challenge facing Hungarian-British defence relations after Brexit is the changed institutional environment. The UK's exit from the European Union has led to the country's exclusion from EU security and defence policies, the European Defence Fund in general and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). In special cases, of course, participation in a PESCO project can be requested and approved by the project host.[48]

As a result, Hungary and the UK must navigate a complex web of bilateral and multilateral agreements to maintain and develop defence cooperation. Another challenge relates to potentially different strategic priorities. As both nations reassess their roles post-Brexit, it will be essential to agree on key security issues. Divergent views on the role of military forces, perceived threats and differences in strategic priorities could potentially strain the partnership unless they are effectively addressed through open dialogue and diplomatic initiatives.

Such a spectacular difference in perception can be seen in Russia's war in Ukraine. Although both sides reject aggression and stand by Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty, the strategic calculations in London and Budapest differ. While the British expect that the Russians can be defeated over time and weakened to the point where they do not pose a significant threat in the future, the Hungarian government fears that time is working against the Ukrainians. The sooner the parties conclude a ceasefire, the more Ukrainian lives, infrastructure and values could be saved, which is vital for Ukraine's sustainable European future.

Despite these challenges, the post-Brexit period will create opportunities for Hungary and the UK to strengthen their defence relations. Both countries, regardless of the political constraints of the EU, can develop more flexible and tailored cooperation agreements. Bilateral agreements covering joint military exercises, information sharing and cooperation in the field of technology development can enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of cooperation.

The UK is also an important pillar of European security. Hungary, as a NATO member, can take advantage of its position within the treaty, underlining the importance of a robust transatlantic security framework. Hungarian-British bilateral cooperation can play a key role in promoting wider NATO goals, contributing to a more flexible and interconnected alliance.

The changing global security environment, characterised by evolving threats such as cyber threats, terrorism and hybrid wars, requires innovative and collaborative responses. Hungary and the UK, drawing on their respective strengths - Hungary's strategic location in Central Europe and the UK's military capabilities and global reach - can, through their combined efforts, meet these challenges. Cooperation between the two countries can contribute to the effective development of a wider European and transatlantic security framework.

Ultimately, the path of Hungarian-British defence relations has reached a critical juncture post-Brexit, marked by both challenges and opportunities. The transformed institutional environment requires sharp and flexible navigation, while building strategic consensus is critical to the success of their evolution. By taking advantage of the flexibility of tailored bilateral agreements and by strengthening their loyalty to NATO, Hungary and the UK can create a defence cooperation characterised by flexibility and dynamism. By adapting to changing geopolitical realities, the Hungarian-British defence partnership has enormous potential to make a significant contribution to the wider European and transatlantic security framework.

Conclusions for Hungarian foreign policy

So, from the British side, we can see a domestic policy that sees the goal of regaining sovereignty, and which is in many points close to the Hungarian government's position. Even if this sovereignty

may be undermined by closer ties with the United States, the principle of sovereignty itself is clear to Budapest. The ideological affinities with the British government do not stop there: whether we look at the confrontation with big US tech companies or German pharmaceutical companies, the decline of education and culture or woke imperialism, we see much in common. However, policy towards the European Union is ambivalent for Hungary. When we say we want a strong Europe, we can think of two things. On the one hand, a highly centralised, federal Europe, where trade policy and identity policy issues are also decided in Brussels and Member States only export - something the Hungarian Government firmly rejects. At the same time, however, a European Union that aspires to a global role, has a strong identity, is based on strong nation states and national economies, and is competitive but with a protected market is clearly in Hungary's interests. While it is clearly in Hungary's interest to prevent the first point, it is also in Hungary's interest to promote the second (and thus to oppose the British government).

In a way, the British government's EU-dividing policy serves Hungarian interests if it is politically effective and works against German or Franco-German domination of the continent. When British policy affects the competitiveness of the continent and its role in the world, it is also contrary to Hungarian interests. In the general context, the following table summarises, in our view, the delicate points of Hungarian-British relations and the Hungarian responses to them.

The general interpretative framework of Hungarian-British bilateral relations is post-Brexit British politics and our ideological proximity to the Tory government. However diverse and sometimes contrary to our interests this British policy may be, the elements in the table show that most of the policy elements we can support either wholeheartedly or with reservations, and are in line with our European goals, while the only point that mainly causes only exposure and disinterest is the British ambition to maintain its leading role in the information economy. This is the point where Hungarian policy can emphasise its essentially anti-British and 'pro-European' views, while for all other elements, a high level of cooperation is recommended based on political-emotional proximity, traditionally good British-Hungarian relations and the principle of utility.

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ESSAY

MILITARY MODERNISATION PROGRAMME OF POLAND 2014-2023

Péter Stepper

ABSTRACT

Poland reached the NATO-recommended GDP defence spending level of 2% as early as 2019, and since then, expenditure on the military has only increased. Despite a 3.65% GDP contraction due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Poland constantly increased the defence budget. Like other Central European countries, Poland inherited a substantial number of tanks and armoured vehicles from the Soviet era. However, the acquisition of Western alternatives began long ago, primarily purchasing equipment from Germany, Finland, and the United States, but also South-Korea emerged as a new business partner. The article examines the recent developments of Polish army modernization started before 2014.

Keywords: Poland, military procurement, war in Ukraine

INTRODUCTION

Poland reached the NATO-recommended GDP defence spending level of 2% as early as 2019, and since then, expenditure on the military has only increased. In 2019, Poland's GDP stood at $590 billion, with defence spending accounting for $12 billion of that sum. Despite a 3.65% GDP contraction due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this amount grew to $13 billion in 2020. The active armed forces consist of 114,000 personnel, of which 58,000 serve in the land forces, 6,000 in the navy, 14,300 in the air force, and 3,150 in special forces. The paramilitary force numbers 75,000 personnel.[1]

Like other Central European countries[2], Poland inherited a substantial number of tanks and armoured vehicles from the Soviet era.[3] However, the acquisition of Western alternatives began long ago, primarily purchasing equipment from Germany, Finland, and the United States.[4]

Before 2022, the majority of Poland's anti-tank and artillery weapons comprised outdated Soviet models, including 9K11 grenade launchers and 122mm Gvozdika self-propelled howitzers. However, modern 155mm Krab howitzers have also been acquired. Poland's rotary-wing capability included 28 Mi-24 attack helicopters, 6 Mi-14, and 4 Mi-2 light transport helicopters, all of which are being replaced by Western models.[5] In air defence, Soviet technology, predominantly, is being phased out in favour of the American Patriot system.[6]

The Polish navy is notoriously outdated, and Poland does not consider itself a maritime power, reflected in the lack of significant naval development. Although the navy has three submarines, two old Oliver Hazard Perry-class frigates, and coast guard patrol boats, this cannot be considered a significant force.[7]

For air force training, Soviet Su-22 fighter-bombers were used, but their replacement is due, with American, Italian, and Swedish alternatives being considered. The backbone of the air force's strike capability has been increasingly provided by F-16s and, more recently, F-35 stealth fighters, replacing a diminishing fleet of MiG-29 fighters, which were handed over to Ukraine despite initial American opposition.[8]

The Polish government planned to increase the active military personnel to 250,000 and the number of reservists to 50,000. They announced the purchase of 32 F-35A fighters to replace MiG-29 squadrons. The modernisation of Poland's tank force will involve

replacing modified T-72 tanks with M1A2 Abrams tanks, with additional Leopard tanks also being purchased alongside the existing 2A4 models. The Soviet-era S-200 air defence system will be replaced by the Patriot air and missile defence system. Poland has also acquired Turkish Bayraktar drones, recognising their significance in the Russia-Ukraine war.[9]

Criticism has arisen regarding the Polish modernisation programme. The procurement process has been characterised by political decisions rather than competitive bidding, with no tenders issued for the Abrams or Bayraktar purchases, meaning that more cost-effective solutions, potentially from political partners like Germany, were not even considered. An exception to this is the replacement of the Su-22 training aircraft, where products from various manufacturers, including Italian and Swedish, were considered.

The primary concerns regarding Poland's developments are sustainability and political stability. By the end of 2023, a coalition government led by KO replaced the PiS government, which has better relations with Western European partners than its predecessor. While the impact of this change has yet to be felt in military procurement, it is likely that European (German and French) military suppliers will gain a more significant share of the Polish market alongside American and South Korean offerings.

A significant question regarding sustainability is how Poland will finance its growing defence budget, given the worsening economic situation and the goal of exceeding 3.5% of GDP. The costs of personnel and organisational expenses for a force of 250,000 must be covered, as well as the payments for new acquisitions. The Abrams acquisition alone cost $6 billion[10], the F-35A purchase $4.6 billion, and the Patriot system $4.75 billion[11], with further expenses incurred by the refurbishment and acquisition of additional Leopard tanks.

Just these major items already exceed Poland's average annual military expenditure. In the early stages, initial purchases can be managed through foreign loans, as banks in the home countries of the defence companies are usually willing to finance such long-term loans. A notable example of this is the South Korean acquisitions made during the PiS government's tenure.

Recently, in addition to their usual American partners, South Korean companies have entered the Polish market, securing large orders that will be partially financed through loans from South Korean banks and Poland's increasingly expanded defence budget. In

addition to finished products, Poland has purchased licences from South Korea to start domestic arms production and has acquired rocket launchers, which have become increasingly popular since the war in Ukraine. Due to limitations in American production capacity, a Korean variant of HIMARS was chosen.

Originally, American Abrams and German Leopard tanks were to replace the Polish T-72 tank variants, but now the largest contracts have been signed with Hyundai Rotem and Hanwha for the acquisition of K2 tanks and K9 self-propelled artillery. Of the 1,000 tanks requested, the first 180, delivered by Hyundai to Warsaw, cost nearly $6 billion.[12]

Possibly to compensate Washington, Poland plans to purchase American AH-64 Apache attack helicopters, with 100 helicopters costing $12 billion.[13] Thus, American companies still receive the most payments, but South Korea has become a clear second among suppliers.

For many years, the backbone of the Polish air force was the MiG-29 fighters, increasingly replaced by F-16s, with the acquisition of 50 FA-50 light attack fighters from South Korea, manufactured by KAI, also being planned at a cost of around $6 billion.[14] In addition, Poland agreed with Washington in 2019 to purchase 32 F-35A fighters, the first of which have already arrived in Poland.[15] Alongside the F-35A purchase, Poland plans to acquire MQ-28A Ghost Bat unmanned aircraft from Boeing's Australian subsidiary.[16]

The Sustainability of the Armament Programme

Poland's annual defence budget of $12 billion is expected to increase in the coming years, though it remains uncertain whether it will actually reach the $24 billion figure, representing 4% of GDP, as announced by Polish officials. As in all European countries, at least half of the budget is consumed by personnel and organisational costs, with the remaining $6 billion being used to finance military operations (such as peacekeeping) and defence procurement. As long as the war in Ukraine continues, and with it the transfer and replacement of military equipment, Poland will naturally spend more than the NATO-recommended 20% on R&D, though it remains to be seen whether this will decline after the modernisation programme concludes.

Contracts signed with South Korea total nearly $20 billion, spread over several years. Given the agreements with the United States for various acquisitions amounting to approximately $30 billion, it is expected that, out of the annual procurement budget of $6-8 billion, at least $4-5 billion will go to manufacturers from these two countries over the next decade. In the event of high budget deficits, foreign loans could provide additional resources for a time, but the specifics of Poland's plans in this regard are understandably not public.

The previous Polish government also established an Armaments Support Fund, which had access to over $2.5 billion in 2022 and over $15 billion in 2023, mostly from foreign loans.[17] The Polish central bank could potentially finance arms purchases by issuing war bonds, though it is unlikely to take this step despite the theoretical possibility. The structure created by the PiS government allows it to avoid significant political opposition, and it is likely that the Tusk administration will not alter this approach, especially since the public continues to support the government on armament issues as long as the war in Ukraine persists.

Poland has already taken out loans worth around $25 billion for South Korean products from various South Korean banks. Korean arms exports have increased by 140% solely due to Polish orders, and Korean banks have struggled to gather enough liquid capital to finance Poland's credit demand. Information on the size of the loan is only available from unofficial sources, and even these came to light only because the matter was raised in a Korean parliamentary interpellation and then reported by the Korean press. Since the Tusk government came to power, Korean media has reported that the deal could be in jeopardy, as the new Polish government is dissatisfied with the loan financing arrangement previously negotiated.[18]

While not directly related to the defence sector, Poland's future energy sector is linked to Korean relations. In addition to the large nuclear facilities being built by 2050, Poland plans to deploy small modular reactors, with South Korea being a potential frontrunner among manufacturers. If a favourable agreement can be reached through arms imports that extends to this area, it would partially explain Poland's one-sided commitment.

Polish Scenarios for the Return on Investment in Procurement

Despite the significant Russian threat, the purchase of thousands of tanks, artillery units, and fighter jets is not justified solely from a military perspective, nor is the method of financing the most advantageous for the Polish state. Nevertheless, these decisions have been made. Moreover, it is essential to note that Poland has not purchased state-of-the-art, exportable equipment but rather elements that were either in storage or previously in service with the Korean military. This trade-off allows Poland to receive the equipment immediately, or at least quickly, but it limits the number of countries to which Poland could later re-export the equipment, as South Korea's approval is required for any such transfer.

This raises the question of what Poland hopes to gain by this procurement process. While Warsaw is unlikely to engage in a conflict with Russia (as it would inevitably involve NATO), it is likely that Poland is preparing to deploy its armed forces in its region and to support Ukraine not only during the current conflict but also in its subsequent reconstruction and rearmament phase. It is anticipated that Ukraine will be forced to repay military aid and loans it received during the war, and this is where Poland could gain influence over Ukrainian internal affairs. The equipment could also be offered to other countries in the region on favourable terms.

However, Poland has already lost influence within NATO over Ukraine. Until the summer of 2023, Washington did not always consult with Poland on major decisions. Instead, the US coordinated aid deliveries and political decisions with the three Baltic states, which hold a more radical position than Warsaw, and London and Bucharest, who share a similar level of influence to Warsaw within the organisation.

To summarise, the Polish defence industry and modernisation programme have undergone significant changes in the past few years, with the growing participation of American and South Korean manufacturers. Whether these developments will prove successful and sustainable in the long term depends on many factors, including Poland's economy, the ongoing war in Ukraine, and the new government's ability to navigate these challenges effectively.

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ESSAY

DRUG-FREE OR DRUG-CONSCIOUS POLICY – AN ANALYSIS OF THE MOTIVATIONS BEHIND MARIJUANA LEGALIZATION

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ABSTRACT

Cannabis Sativa is an ancient plant that has been a valuable species for humans for most of our history because of its beneficial uses (fibre, textiles, medicine). By the middle of the 20th century, the use of the plant had become much more restricted as scientific research revealed the plant's psychoactive compounds and their negative effects. Even though under international law cannabis cultivation, supply, and possession should be restricted exclusively to medical and scientific purposes, there has been some changes in that field. Many countries have changed policy by adopting some forms of drug liberalization. As a result, complicated regulatory structures that differ by nation have emerged, raising several questions and concerns allowing us to observe different control models.

Keywords: marijuana legalization, decriminalization

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that psychoactive substances and related policies are important social, political, legal, economic, and scientific issues at both national and international levels. Marijuana and its related legislation are receiving more attention these days, and it's safe to say that the matter has recently become a hotly debated topic.

Marijuana has been widely used as an illegal mind-altering drug through the black market even though cannabis usage should be restricted exclusively to medical and scientific purposes under international law.[1] In 2013, the news that the Uruguayan government had fully legalized the recreational use of marijuana caused a huge international controversy.[2] However, Uruguay is not the only example of drug liberalization efforts as several countries have authorized the use of marijuana, adopting certain forms of drug liberalization (depenalization, decriminalization, partial or total legalization of the market).

I aim to examine nations where the legality of the drug in question has a different status highlighting the controversiality of this topic: Uruguay is a pioneer in the full legalization of marijuana, setting an example for countries considering any form of decriminalization. Germany where medical marijuana is legal and there is an ongoing debate over allowing non-medical cannabis. Last but not least Hungary, where both medical and recreational cannabis is strictly prohibited. In this discussion, I will not discuss the impact and consequences of drug awareness policies, as due to the short time since the first legalization, the lack of resources, and the difficulty of accessing them, this area is not yet a sufficiently developed research dimension to be supported by data. Drug-free and drug-cautious policy identifies several areas that are worth examining, so I aim to answer the following research questions:

1. Why did the green wave start globally? – Why are some nations changing their drug policy concerning marijuana?
2. What are the interests and arguments that might lead a country to follow a drug-conscious drug policy? – What are the reasons behind the prohibition of marijuana?

METHODOLOGY

My work focuses on the two emerged drug policy approaches: drug-free and drug-conscious strategy. In this paper, the international legal frameworks surrounding marijuana policy are accurately described, along with the basic regulatory models developed recently, and the selected countries' standpoint concerning cannabis policy. In the paper, I conduct qualitative research using secondary sources, which are the relevant literature, texts of international conventions, national legislation and official documents and press articles.

In the theoretical part of my research, I evaluate the reviewed literature, with increased attention to the international conventions in order to reveal the motivations and interests behind changing the drug policy approach. Then I examine the recently developed cannabis policy models. As a practical part of my work, I analyse the national cannabis policy situation in Uruguay, Germany, and Hungary and monitor the local press in order to reveal the arguments behind drug-conscious and drug-free policies.

INTERNATIONAL REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

Currently, three United Nations conventions lay out the fundamental principles for regulating the production, trade, and possession of cannabis along with more than 240 psychoactive substances. The goal of these accords is to develop globally applicable regulatory models to ensure that psychoactive drugs are available for medicinal and scientific purposes while preventing their diversion into criminal channels.

1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs

The 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs signed by 154 countries incorporates additional measures not included in previous treaties resulting in creating a unified, global system of drug control. The Convention only recognizes the medical and scientific uses of narcotic drugs, in this sense, Article 49 2(f) established a 25-year goal for outlawing cannabis' traditional uses expired in 1989 since the Convention came into force in 1964. It also outlines that all the contracting states shall prohibit the unauthorized use

of drugs. In this sense Article 36. (49) states that unauthorized actions with cannabis for non-medical purposes should be subject to criminal penalties.

The 1961 Convention created a global drug control system. It established the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND), which provides global policy guidance and is the body responsible for deciding on future treaty amendments. It has also established the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) to monitor the implementation of the Convention. If the INCB feels that a country is not complying with the conventions, it can name it in its annual report and propose sanctions against it. The World Health Organization (WHO) is provided with expert input. It provides CND with basic scientific evidence when it comes to amending treaties.

1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances

In the decade following the 1961 Convention, new drugs, largely more 'synthetic' drugs, have been proliferated. In response to the diversification of drug use, a second convention was adopted to strengthen the control of new drugs. The 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances, which was signed by 184 countries divided the chemicals into four Schedules. The delta-9-THC (dronabinol), was originally listed in Schedule I (chemicals having a serious health risk), but the Commission on Narcotic Drugs moved it to Schedule II (substances having limited therapeutic values) on the basis of a WHO recommendation.[3]

1988 Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances

More than 10 years later another UN document was adopted by 191 countries in 1988 titled Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, which has been negotiated to resolve some international problems by implementing more repressive policies. Despite the intentions of the 1961 and 1971 conventions, drug use has continued to grow and the global market for illicit drugs has become a multi-billion-dollar industry controlled by criminal groups. In response, President Richard Nixon declared 'war on drugs' in 1971, by making drugs 'public en-

emy number one' to the United States, and a few years later mandatory minimum penalties and mass imprisonment were implemented in the country to reduce illegal trade. The great power placed pressure on the rest of the world to join the 'war on drugs' and soon afterwards the 1988 UN conference was organized.[4]

The purpose of the UN Convention of 1988 was to support cooperation among Parties so that they could handle the various aspects of an illicit international narcotic drug and psychotropic substance trafficking more effectively. The treaty requests countries 'subject to constitutional principles and basic concepts' of their legal systems, to criminalize, in other worlds to handle 'as a criminal offense [...] the possession, purchase or cultivation of drugs [...] for personal consumption'. (Article 3 (2)). It states that unauthorized conduct must be a punishable offense, which should result in some form of deprivation of liberty.[5]

MODELS FOR CANNABIS POLICY AND RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

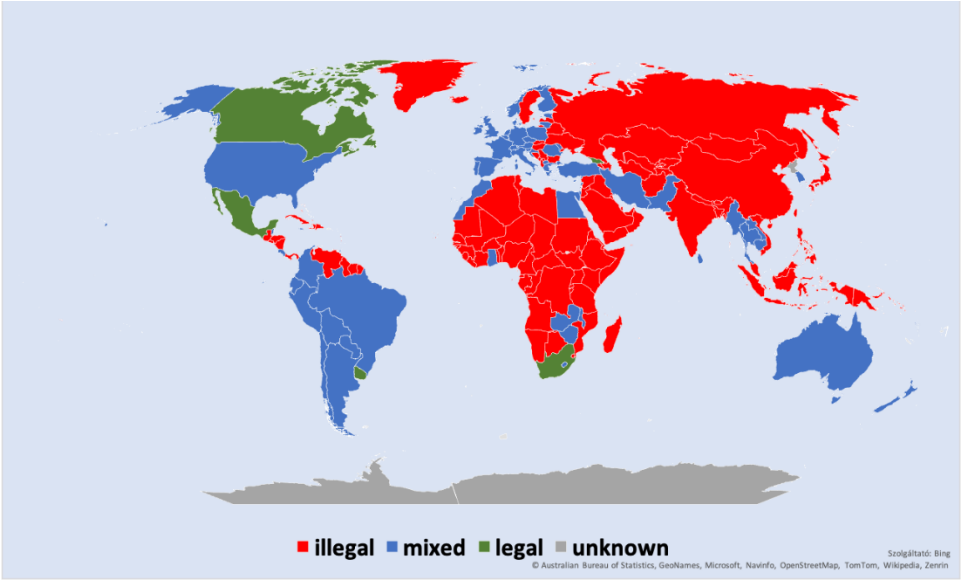
Cannabis has been the most widely consumed illicit drug for years and this position was held in the year 2021 as well since over 22 million European adults reported its use last year.[6] Even though international law requires governments to apply criminal sanctions for non-medical and non-scientific marijuana cultivation, production, distribution, and possession, some countries are making exceptions, which has fuelled a renewed debate regarding the national laws which may depanelize, decriminalize, legalize, or regulate cannabis use and supply. Clarifying these terms is essential due to their frequent use in the marijuana control debate. They are differentiated as follows:

- Depenalization refers to the reductions in sanctions in the sense that an act remains a criminal offense but is no longer punishable by imprisonment. The drug remains illegal but for example the possession of small quantities of marihuana is not punished as with the possibility of an option or policy of closing a case without penalty is introduced, since the case is considered 'minor'. Finland and Egypt are a few examples.
- Decriminalization is a term used to denote the reclassification of the status of an offense from criminal to non-criminal. It does not mean that the action is legal, it remains a prohibited behavior (offense), which may be punished by the police

rather than a court. Portugal for example shifts the focus of drug offenders from traditional criminal penalties to non-criminal penalties, including treatment, education programs, and fines.

- Legalization denotes making a previously prohibited conduct legal. Regarding the drug debate, a transition from a banned action to a lawful one refers to removing all criminal and non-criminal sanctions. Legalization has occurred for example in Uruguay and some states in the USA.
- Regulation is closely linked to the concept of legalization, implying that sets of rules limit the supply and use of legal substances. In countries where cannabis has been legalized, regulations may place restrictions on the scope of the permission, as is the case with alcohol and tobacco. Regulatory systems often impose limits on access, such as age limits and on advertising. Systems in Uruguay and the Netherlands serve as examples.[7]

The following map depicts the most recent status of cannabis legality in the world, which may help in understanding and obtaining a more accurate picture of this multifaceted area. As the map's colorful nature indicates, different regulatory models and responses exist when it comes to the legal status of cannabis. Regarding the cultivation, possession, distribution, and medical usage in terms of how it may be consumed and what health problems it can be used for, the legality of cannabis for both medicinal and recreational use differs by country.



1. Figure 1. Legal Status of Cannabis in 2023

Source: author's own editing based on data from World Map of Cannabis Legality. (2022. October 5). Cannabis Affiliate & Business Resources. Retrieved 2022. October 22. from https://thcaffiliates.com/legal-status-maps/world/

Basically, three cases can be distinguished:

1. There are countries where marijuana usage is illegal either for medical and non-medical purposes and controlled by strict laws. The vast majority of countries follow such policies, including Hungary.
2. On the other hand, a growing number of nations have implemented mixed legal status, which allows for various medical uses of cannabis but prohibits its recreational use. Decriminalization and/or depenalization laws, however, might be implemented in relation to cannabis regulation. For instance, while recreational use is prohibited and consumption is punishable by light penalties, certain medicinal forms are allowed in.
3. The full legal status of cannabis has been adopted by only a few countries. In Uruguay, Canada, Mexico, Malta, South Africa and some US states (not yet illustrated) the cultivation, possession, and sale of marijuana for medical and recreational purposes is legal.[8]

Examining the different cannabis policy models observed in the map presented in the previous chapter may raise the question of why such a huge differentiation among nations is there if the UN conventions put it in a framework. Although international law requires parties to criminalize the cultivation, production, distribution and possession of marijuana for non-medical and non-scientific purposes, some countries make exceptions.[9] Contrary to popular belief, none of the restricted substances were deemed 'illegal' because drugs were only subjected to varying levels of regulation depending on which Schedule they were assigned to. The treaties only provide a strict legal control system for the production and supply of all regulated drugs for medical and scientific reasons, as well as sanctions to combat the illicit production and trade of these substances for other uses. Consequently, no relationship is made between the type of substance and the punishments set in national law by the conventions. Given that, the different national interpretations of a criminal offense and the applicable sanction resulted in developing a wide range of responses across the world.[10]

URUGUAY

In 2013 Uruguay became the first country in the modern era to enact laws establishing a legal, controlled market for non-medical marijuana, and after the recreational cannabis law was approved it started to develop its medicinal cannabis program as well. State-licensed medical cannabis manufacturing is legal under National Law and patients with a prescription can buy extracts in pharmacies. As for the non-medical usage of cannabis, the Uruguayan National Law (No. 19.172) permits the state to regulate the supply and consumption of cannabis for registered adult users.[11]

The marijuana policy has been changed under the presidency of José Mujica, who called the choice of legalization an 'intellectual experiment' in contrast to the U.S. 's 'war on drugs' standpoint.[12] Mujica intended to create a more egalitarian and productive alternative to the methods used by most Western nations since the former president thought that the practices used to tackle drug-related crime had failed. Uruguay's strategy has attempted to present itself as a human right and forward-thinking country on a global scale, reported Milton Romani, former secretary of the Uruguayan National Council on Drugs to a local newspaper. He added that the war on drugs and repression has only led to generating new problems instead of solving the difficulties, which is manifested by the fact that violence is increasing and neither production, trafficking nor consumption is ceasing.[13]

In addition, the Uruguayan marijuana policy with legalization has sought to establish circumstances in which marijuana usage is not pervasive. The policymakers' goal was to make marijuana affordable, procedural, and standardized with the help of the limitations imposed on cannabis demand and supply. 'To us, marijuana is a vegetable substance with a capacity to generate addiction, so what we're trying to do is control the production, distribution, and consumption of that substance as effectively as possible.' – that is how Julio Calzada shared the standpoint of the government with the media, who is a public health officer.[14]

Julio Bango, an author of cannabis law has also emphasized that the question of legalization is not only going to be controversial at the national level because of the divided public opinion toward marijuana law but at the international scene as well. 'We know this

[marijuana legalization] has generated an international debate and we hope it brings another element to discussions about a model [the drugs] that has totally failed and that has generated the opposite results from what it set out to achieve.' [15]

GERMANY

Since 2017 cannabis is lawful in Germany for some medical reasons but prohibited for recreational use, however possession of small amounts is not generally punished. Despite these conditions, the potential legalization of cannabis for recreational use is on the horizon since the new administration, led by Chancellor Olaf Scholz intends to implement a controlled dispensing approach.[16]

The German government's standpoint is that decades of prohibition have only intensified drug-related problems, and that legalization will better safeguard youth and health. 'Because too restrictive conditions for the legal market only promote the black market for particularly strong cannabis' – that is how the Greens' lawmaker, Kirsten Kappert-Gonther shared the standpoint of the party with CNBC.[17] Prof. Dr. Kirsten Müller-Vahl, a Physician at the Medical University of Hannover also thinks that the previous prohibition policy has not achieved its goal since consumption is not reducing. According to her, the right way is education and information-providing programs that all drugs have risks, including alcohol, nicotine, and cannabis, and responsible use of them is needed. She added that it is time to take a more realistic approach because there will never be a drug-free world.[18]

The government also promotes cannabis legalization because of the appearance of synthetic cannabinoids, which imitate the effects of THC, the substance primarily responsible for the psychoactive effects of cannabis. As the European Drug Report of 2022 writes it is likely that criminals are counterfeiting cannabis products to maximize profits, as low-THC industrial hemp is cheap and has a similar appearance to the illicit cannabis plant. This makes it easier to deceive dealers and users, while only a small amount of synthetic cannabinoid powder is needed to induce strong cannabis-like effects. The report also stresses that three countries reported deaths related to synthetic cannabinoids in 2020, including Germany.[19] According to Professor Volker Auwärter, Head of the Department of Forensic Toxicology at the University of Freiburg consumers cannot detect the difference between 'regular' cannabis,

and this modified product, because they do not differ in look, smell, or taste. Volker thinks that this problem could be eliminated by a regulated market.[20]

German politicians also stress the fact that a regulated market could reallocate state resources as well. According to a poll conducted in 2021, legalizing marijuana could bring Germany yearly tax income and cost savings of around 4.7 billion euros ($4.7 billion).[21]

On 26 October 2022 Federal Health Minister Karl Lauterbach has already presented the key points of the draft law on the legalization of cannabis at a press conference. The main idea of the proposal is to create a regulated cannabis market in order that the state have more control over it. Lauterbach said that legal consumption could become possible in 2024 at the earliest if all goes according to the plan.[22]

Despite the number of statements said in favour of cannabis legalization, many still argue in Germany that it may cause more harm than good. Thomas Preis, president of the North Rhine Pharmacists' Association warned of the health consequences of legalizing cannabis and reported that it would place pharmacies in a difficult legal and ethical position because pharmacists are healthcare professionals who are sceptical of marijuana. [23]

Moreover, not all federal states have supported the legalization idea, for instance, the health minister of Bavaria issued a warning against drug tourism to Germany. According to the Bavarian Health Minister, Klaus Holetschek said that any attempt to trivialize it is totally irresponsible and legalization may make Germany a European drug tourism destination.[24] Dr. Klaus Reinhardt, the President of the German Medical Association, for example, said in the Deutschlandfunk Kultur's podcast that it is shocking that the health minister who is also a doctor is in favour of legalizing a drug. He has drawn attention to the negative effects of marijuana, which is known to increase psychosis, depression, anxiety disorders, and cognitive impairment. He added that it causes brain changes in young people therefore, in his opinion it has nothing to do with youth protection. The expectation that legalization would reduce harm is also unproven so the aim should rather be to limit the spread of addictive substances, said Reinhardt in the report.[25] Other sceptics, like Rainer Thomasius, an addiction physician at the Hamburg-Eppendorf University Medical Centre emphasized in

ZDFheute Live that legalization of cannabis would inevitably lead to an increase in marijuana consumption, which enhances the risk of addiction and cannabis use as a gateway drug, which is a theory that young people who have tried cannabis have been using opioids (more dangerous substances) alongside cannabis products.[26]

HUNGARY

The Hungarian legal system is in contrast to previous examples since it follows a complete prohibitionist drug policy meaning that both medical and recreational cannabis is illegal. In general, it is illegal to cultivate, import, or sell cannabis for medicinal purposes and the Hungarian Criminal Code prohibits producing, selling, purchasing, trafficking, or importing cannabis containing THC for recreational use as well. THC strains may only be used for research or industrial purposes, according to Hungarian law, but all such activity requires a license from the National Institute for Pharmacy and Nutrition (Országos Gyógyszerészeti és Élelmezés-egészségügyi Intézet – OGYÉI).[27]

As for the penalization of taking illegal substances the Hungarian Criminal Code distinguishes the behavior of drug trafficking, punished imprisonment between two to eight years by and possession of narcotic drugs, which entails imprisonment between one to five years. (Criminal Code, 176. § (1) and 178. § (1)). In Hungarian legislation, the term 'a small quantity' may mitigate the punishment (Criminal Code, 180. § (1), (2)), which is determined in a maximum of 6 grams of total THC or in up to 5 cannabis plants. (Criminal Code, 461. § (1) (c), (2)). As an alternative to criminal proceedings in case of possessing 'a small quantity', consumers may choose a six-month diversion program. This generally entails participation in individual or group consulting at a drug treatment centre, which does not show on any criminal records.[28]

The Hungarian government has been fighting for a drug-free country for years. Its own solution attempt is the so-called National Anti-Drug Strategy that set objectives for the period 2013-2020, however, it is still in force. The main aim of the strategy is to reduce illicit drug use through targeted, community-based interventions.[29] The Hungarian government has no intention of changing its present drug policy, which publicly opposes the legalization of both medicinal and recreational cannabis. According to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Hungary, Péter Szijjártó drug legalization is a

threat to Europe and he called the strategy of certain liberal European countries that legalize drug usage harmful. He claims that such policies endanger society's health and raise the demand for narcotics, leading to increased organized crime.[30]

Hungary does not have a cannabis medical program therefore no therapeutic product is authorized for commercialization that contains cannabis or its derivatives as an active component. Hungary does not show any aspiration to change its laws toward medical cannabis. Miklós Kásler oncologist and Minister of Human Resources of Hungary (2018-2022) declared the Hungarian legal settlement on medical cannabis is simple, the government's position is pure and clear, and no change is planned in that field, wrote the hvg.hu.[31] In the Reaktor Podcast Noémi Emőke Baráth, sociologist and criminologist at the Institute for Drug Research (Drogkutató Intézet) said that because scientists are currently debating whether marijuana may be recommended for the treatment of various diseases, it is hard to determine if it is dangerous or beneficial. However, she stressed that in many circumstances, alternative medications can be used in place of medical marijuana and outlined that doctors should be asked whether they believe it is viable to legalize medicinal marijuana in Hungary within a controlled framework.[32]

The Hungarian government did not vote in accordance with the EU Member States' shared position on the UN resolution, which would have helped boost medical cannabis legalization efforts also in Hungary. The vote was made at the December 2020 meeting of the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND), which aim was to reschedule cannabis and cannabis resin upon the WHO recommendation from Schedule IV to Schedule I of the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs. It was a significant improvement since the UN recognized marijuana's therapeutic potential. Before the voting, a representative of the Orbán government called the suggestions a severe step towards drug liberalization and, at the same time, a disgraceful intervention in national drug policy.[33] As only the Hungarian delegation cast a vote against the suggestions, an infringement procedure was implemented against Hungary. The European Commission claimed that the European Council approved a binding unified position in November 2020 and Hungary should have voted accordingly.[34]

Reasons behind the 'Green wave'

I used the term 'green wave' in the paper to describe a phenomenon that refers to the fact that an increasing number of countries change their drug-free policy to drug-conscious policies in case of marijuana. On the map introduced in the chapter 3 (figure 1), all the countries marked by blue and green are part of that 'green wave'. Knowing the international legal documents on cannabis, the question arises why the 'green wave has started' globally.

Countries that have changed or are taking into consideration changing their approach toward marijuana argue that practices in the fight against drug-related crime have failed. The notion of a 'drug-free society' on which the global drug control system was built 62 years ago (UN Convention, 1961) is still in existence. However, globally sanctioned oppressive practices are increasingly being recognized as more harmful than occasional drug usage.

It can be said that the international conventions describe globally applicable regulatory models that ensure that psychoactive drugs are available for medical and scientific purposes, while preventing their diversion into crime through criminal sanctions. However, those countries that are moving towards permissive drug policies (Uruguay and possibly Germany) are emphasizing the so-called interpretive solution to best protect their societies. These countries argue that their policy is fully in line with the original objectives of the drug control treaties, namely the protection of the health and well-being of mankind, which is a human rights issue. As a result, they invoke the primacy of human rights principles over drug control obligations and interpret the text of international conventions differently, which leads to different national definitions of the offence and the applicable penalties, thus allowing for different regulatory models.

Drug-free or drug-conscious society

What can be observed on the international scene is that the world become divided concerning drug policy as a consequence of the 'green wave': some nations consider the drug-conscious policy to be a better solution instead of the drug-free one, while the majority of countries still follow the original, prohibitionist strategy made by the UN Conventions.

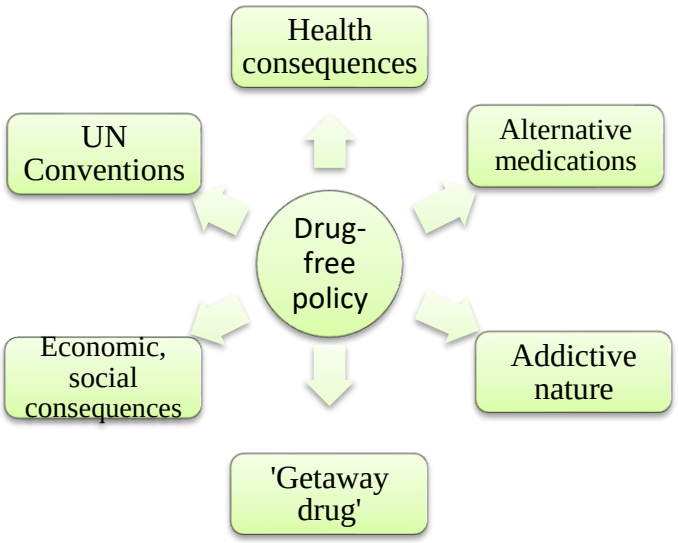
The basic idea of drug-conscious approach is to make cannabis legal in a way that marijuana production and marketing are state monopolies, thereby, sale and consumption must meet certain rules. As for the reasons and interests behind these policies and their changes, the following ideas can be concluded from the analyzed press media that I summarized in the following table.

1. Table 1. Motivations for a drug-conscious policy

Reduce crime	The leaders of the country want to reduce organized crime and violence associated with the cannabis trade and trafficking. Their aim is to minimalize the harm caused by the illegal market by decreasing the propensity to commit a crime.
Curb the black market	The government aims to shrink the black market's size and to prevent organized crime groups from generating profits from the illegal cannabis trade. It is intended to achieve these goals by making lawfully buying substances more appealing (price and quality) than purchasing them on the criminal market.
Reallocate the resources	The political leadership goal is to minimalize the expense of law enforcement and the costs of policing, freeing up resources that can be reallocated to substance abuse prevention and treatment to ensure public health and safety.
Improve public health	The leadership is motivated to create a state-controlled market that can allow for better safeguarding of youth by regulating marijuana availability and ensuring public health by guaranteeing product quality and THC content. A regulated market can also help to exclude the recently appeared synthetic THC.
Enhance public safety	It is intended to create such a strategy that protects citizens and combats the health, social and economic consequences of the problematic use of psychoactive substances by taking steps to educate, raise awareness, and warn about the health risks of cannabis use.

Although some countries argue that the drug-aware policy is the solution to tackle drug-related problems, the vast majority of coun-

tries still follow the drug-free policy in their current official documents. These nations still follow the main ideas of the three UN Conventions' provisions, under which unauthorized cannabis usage entailing non-medical and non-scientific are punishable offenses since they consider that way the most effective one when it comes to tackling drug-related harm. Countries following anti-drug strategies most often argue in favor of it because of the detrimental physical and mental health consequences that marijuana usage may entail. Countries prohibiting marijuana usage deny that legalization would improve public health and would protect youngsters. Another motivation behind following the drug-free approach is the fact that alternative medications are available on the market, therefore society does not suffer any lack of missing an active ingredient. Nations banning marijuana usage often refer to its highly addictive nature as well and argue that legalization would only lead to an increase in marijuana consumption. Cannabis is often thought to be a getaway drug consequently, countries having prohibitionist drug policies believe that their strategy is the most appropriate to prevent citizens from trying out 'harder' drugs. Additional arguments supporting a drug-free society are the negative social and economic consequences resulting from the problematic use of cannabis that can only be eliminated with prohibition. Governments and specialists advocating for a drug-free approach argue that it is unproven that the other drug strategy would reduce harm. Such problems may include, failure to complete education, poor work performance, and involvement in the criminal justice system.



2. Figure Ideas for the drug-free policy

CONCLUSION

Taking everything into account it can be said that the question of drug-free and drug-aware cannabis policy raise many questions at both national and international level, which incite countries to open debates on this multifaceted problem. I highlighted the fact in my research paper that the debate over marijuana, the legal framework around it, and the circumstances characterizing its current position vary from country to country illustrating the complexity of cannabis-related concerns. In my research paper, I managed to prove the following patterns:

Countries involved in the ‘green wave’ argue that international conventions are outdated, since the concept of a "drug-free society", on which the global drug control system was built 62 years ago (UN Convention, 1961), still exists despite the failure of practices to combat drug-related crime. These countries argue that the negative consequences of prohibitionist policies go beyond the expected good practices, as the 'repression' caused by the 'war on drugs' approach has only generated new problems instead of solving them. Therefore, they are convinced that reforms are needed to find more inclusive and efficient alternatives instead of the previous prohibitionist approach and establish drug laws and policies based on reason, scientific evidence, and human rights instead of prohibition.

Answering the question that what the interests and arguments might incite a country to follow a drug-conscious policy I found that governments consider this approach a more effective and efficient way compared to the previous prohibitionist strategy that can achieve developments in reducing crime, curbing the black market, reallocating the resources, improving public health, and finally enhancing public safety. In this section, I also analyzed the banning, drug-free cannabis policy, in order to reveal why some nations still prefer marijuana to have an illegal status. I have come to the conclusion that these countries must be satisfied with the UN Conventions as their national cannabis approach is built upon it. Furthermore, they are convinced that legal marijuana would only result in bigger social, economic, and health consequences, because of its highly addictive nature and because it is considered to be a getaway

drug. Finally, countries opposing marijuana legalization emphasize that there are alternative medications that can be used instead of marijuana.

Summarizing up, cannabis regulations are without a doubt one of the most intricate and divisive aspects of drug policy. The 1961 Convention, which remains the basis of the whole system, was drawn up in the 1940s and 50s - an era when drug consumption and drug markets were substantially different from today and when there was not a lot of scientific data at hand. There are undoubtedly ongoing and escalating conflicts within the cannabis treaty regime, which have long been known to the international world, including the UN drug control bureaucracy. These treaty tensions must be visible at drug discussions as more and more jurisdictions implement measures to legalize and control adult use of cannabis, but they are being disregarded. What I think is that governments and the UN system ought to give careful thought to how to handle these policy adjustments in a way that can support the modernization of the drug treaty framework. What I think is that marijuana policy is an ever-changing field, therefore well-founded research is needed to be conducted in order that individual countries could decide which drug policy would be the most appropriate one to use.

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ESSAY

THE V4 INITIATIVES IN THE WB6 COUNTRIES – FROM A CONSTRUCTIVIST PERSPECTIVE

Emília Sára Szalai

ABSTRACT

The V4 is an actively functioning cooperation framework in Central Europe. Its active engagement in the Western Balkan region has been and remains one of the most important aspects of the region's democratization, civil society development, and Euro-Atlantic integration. From a constructivist perspective, the V4 identity supports its rapprochement of the Western Balkans by emphasizing the significance of common historical experiences, political goals, regional cooperation, and mutual acceptance. The historical identity of the V4 offers a solid basis for collaborative aspirations aimed at promoting stability and growth in the area. Furthermore, the V4's approach to the Western Balkans is guided by its political identity, which is based on a dedication to national sovereignty, regional collaboration (again), and Euro-Atlantic integration.

Keywords: V4, Western Balkans, political identity

INTRODUCTION

The Visegrad Group (V4) is a form of regional cooperation in Central Europe, comprising of Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia. This group was established to strengthen the political, economic, and cultural ties among the countries in the region, as well as to support each other in European and international affairs. Cooperation among the V4 countries covers numerous areas, such as security policy, economic development, and infrastructure building. This partnership plays an enormous role in promoting stability and development in the region.

Since its signing, the Visegrád Declaration has emphasized the importance of community and cooperation among the V4 countries, strengthening common political, economic, and cultural relations. Furthermore, the set of principles underscores the significance of democracy, human rights, as well as stability and security in the region. Additionally, it highlights the commitment to promoting economic development and competitiveness, which are crucial for the economic and social progress of the V4 (Gyárfášová & Mesežnikov, 2021).

The V4's efforts in the above-mentioned fields can be felt strongly in the areas it has been committed to. After the region's European Union (EU) accession in 2004, new aims of the cooperation have been named after it fulfilled its original purpose, which was the Euro-Atlantic integration of the member countries. The new goals that have been set focused on different strategic targets, of which the assistance in the Western Balkan (WB) region to the integration of the European Union stood out (Juzová, 2023). This objective has been channelled through policies and initiatives in the past years and been one of the great successes of the cooperation framework. In this study, these initiatives, policies, and their impacts are going to be in the limelight, and how the V4 cooperation framework places its identity on the cooperation of the Western Balkans. Furthermore, the paper will explore how it influences the development of civil society, democratization, and stabilization in the region. This research is going to answer the following questions: How does the V4 identity explain its rapprochement of the Western Balkans from a constructivist perspective? What role do

V4 initiatives play in the development of civil society and in the development of European values of the Western Balkan countries?

To fully understand the term identity and identity of the V4 cooperation framework (Rada, 2021), conventional constructivist perspectives[1] will be introduced and added to the V4's policy pattern. This aims to explain why these states act the way they do and why they are focusing massive resources on other regions' civil society and development.

This essay is written using a descriptive method according to and in line with the academic literature on the topic. Furthermore, analyses and data will be processed, which are provided by the surveys and conclusions of some of the institutions of the regions concerned. The essay also includes official statements of the member countries and publications of the International Visegrad Fund, the Western Balkans Fund, and the governments of the Visegrad Group.

The essay processes certain topics alongside the above-mentioned one in the focus. The essay will start with an introduction that gives a summary of the subject and the essay's format. After that, it will go into detail explaining the creation and goals of the Visegrad Group. The group's role in creating and executing a functional framework will be discussed in the next section, which will also show how it has changed over time. This will set up a conversation on the constructivist method and the Visegrad Group's identity, looking at both political and historical aspects. The article will then concentrate on the Visegrad Group's activities in the Western Balkans. The notion of the "indivisible region" will be examined, along with the dynamics between the Western Balkans and the V4 as norm takers and norm makers.

The next sections will look at the V4's activities in the Western Balkans, including the Civil Servants Mobility Program (CSMP), scholarship programs, and the International Visegrad Fund (IVF). It will also evaluate the efficacy of civil society projects in the Western Balkans, including Think Balkans and the Western Balkan Fund. The article will also discuss the engagement of the V4 nations in the "Berlin Process" and the presence of other global powers in the area. The article will next explore the restrictions and

difficulties the V4 nations have encountered while interacting with the Western Balkans. Lastly, it will be concluded by reviewing the most important discoveries and talking about the ramifications for the next studies and regulations.

THE VISEGRAD GROUP

The Visegrad 4 cooperation is a forward-looking initiative formed by Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia at the level of regional policy and social organization. This alliance symbolizes not only a shared commitment to regional policies but also a common cultural and social agenda within both the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The roots of this collaboration trace back centuries, with historical records dating as far back as the 1300s, when regional rulers recognized the benefits of the regional cooperation. This historical precedent set the stage for enduring cooperation, allowing leaders of these nations to convene, deliberate, and work collectively towards shared goals (MFA Hungary, 2021).

Fast forward more than five centuries later, the geopolitical landscape of Europe underwent a significant shift with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the subsequent liberation of Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the wake of these transformative events, nations that had recently regained their freedom, namely Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, looked to their historical experiences for guidance. The geographical proximity, shared social conditions, and comparable economic situations among these countries highlighted the special value of resurrecting the historical unity embodied by the Visegrad cooperation (MFA Hungary, 2021).

This feel of common identity took shape in the signing of the Visegrad Declaration on February 15, 1991, marking the formal reestablishment of the Visegrad Group. The initial years following this crucial declaration were dedicated to setting forth the group's objectives and creating a cohesive agenda for the future. At the core of their vision was an unwavering commitment to integration into Euro-Atlantic structures, namely the European Union and NATO (International Visegrad Fund, 2006). By endorsing this foundational declaration, the Visegrad Group laid down the fundamental

pillars of its regional initiative, paving the way for collective projects and active engagement in the economic and political arenas of Europe.

However, the road to regional cooperation was not without its challenges. Leadership changes in the newly independent Czech Republic and Slovak Republic, following the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1992, presented significant obstacles. Yet, despite these difficulties, the creation of the Central Europe Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) emerged as a notable success in promoting economic subregional cooperation. CEFTA's significance extended beyond economic fields, serving as an incentive for revitalizing the Visegrad forum and reaffirming the commitment to regional collaboration (Cottey, 1999).

In subsequent years, governmental changes in Slovakia and the Czech Republic in 1998 spurred a re-evaluation of their commitment to the cooperation and a redefinition of strategic objectives. This period witnessed an expansion of cooperation into various domains, including foreign and internal policy, interregional partnerships, education, and civil society. By meeting the demanding accession criteria set forth by the European Union, all four V4 countries achieved full membership on May 1, 2004, marking a significant milestone in their Euro-Atlantic integration journey (Figel, 2002).

The post-accession era directed the countries towards a period of reflection for the Visegrad cooperation. With the attainment of full membership, the region is loaded with questions regarding the future path of cooperation. In response, the signing of the Kroměříž Declaration reaffirmed the commitment to the economic and political strengthening of Central Europe and the consolidation of V4 identity. Furthermore, the declaration articulated the V4 countries' dedication to contributing to EU objectives, supporting enlargement processes, and shaping EU policies towards Eastern and Southeastern Europe.

Amidst these developments, the V4's focus on the Western Balkans emerged as a cornerstone of their regional engagement efforts. This constant commitment necessitates further exploration, indicating the V4's role as a stimulant for regional stability and

integration. Subsequent sections will dive into the Visegrad Group's initiatives towards Western Balkan countries from a constructivist perspective, offering deeper insights into the evolving dynamics of regional cooperation and integration in Europe (Reményi, Pap & Pap, 2021).

TAKING OVER A FUNCTIONING FRAMEWORK

In this research, I use the term 'V4 identity' to refer to the identity of the Visegrad Group's policy frameworks and mechanisms, which aim to promote the V4's pre-defined objectives in its area and the neighbouring regions. The V4's objectives of encouraging cooperation and mutual support among the member states, particularly in areas like defence, security, economy, culture, and regional development, are essential to its character. The organization wants to make Central Europe more heard both domestically in the EU and globally.

It functions as an intergovernmental body with a specific structure and agenda for policies. To promote collaboration among its members. The Visegrád Group coordinates policy positions on a range of topics, such as foreign policy, EU integration, energy security, and migration. Despite potential differences, the V4 aims to reach consensus and take a united viewpoint to achieve the common pre-set objectives (Törő, Butler, & Grúber, 2014).

Within its structure and policies, the Visegrád Group's identity is also defined by the values of solidarity, sovereignty, and regional cooperation. It emphasizes how crucial it is to defend the political and economic interests of Central European countries within the larger European framework, while maintaining their cultural and historical links. With collaboration in the Western Balkans, these ideas and frameworks can find new ways to improve and strengthen civil society in the whole CEE region (Törő, Butler, & Grúber, 2014).

These actions are fuelled by the clear political interests of the V4 members because of the WB region's strategic and economic importance. It can be seen clearly that a very strong pillar of V4 foreign policy appears, too, when strengthening democracy and fostering a robust civil society comes into the picture. It is worth noting

that this kind of discourse about civil society contributes in many ways to the narrative that the V4 influence is a working phenomenon and an advocate for democracy, supporter of EU integration, stabilizer in the region, normative leader, and practitioner of soft power. It emphasizes engagement with the Western Balkans as part of a broader strategy to promote their values, interests, and influence in the region (Strážay, 2021).

The V4 cooperation framework operates primarily on a political level, focusing on cooperation among its member states without giving field to historical grievances. It is driven by the characteristics of the group, the preference of the voters, and the political leadership chosen by these voters in each member state, which appears in the political directions of the cooperation (Visegrad Group, 2006). Even in the event of possible V4 governance changes, cooperation between the V4 and the Western Balkans will not be disrupted since V4 institutions operate largely independently of individual member states in terms of funding their programs, therefore support for civil society initiatives, university exchanges, and cultural activities will continue to be pursued. In case of these changes in the political landscape of the given members, the V4 results can be continuously present in the Western Balkans as well, and it might not drastically influence the current status quo and the standard operating procedures in the Western Balkans (Griessler, 2018).

From a constructivist perspective, it can be stated that what works in the V4 might work in the WB region as well, within certain limitations or restrictions. We can also state that there are benefits of exporting V4 values and good practices, however this in itself is not transformative. Strengthening civil society and giving examples of transformation does not solve all problems rooted in the development of the region, the lack of democratic progress, and lagging behind the field of critical infrastructure. Step by step, the V4 presence can add to the WB developments, and apart from or by collaboration of the EU and NATO, V4 influence can be one of the factors of change in that region (Mykulanynets, 2007). These developments in the WB are crucial for all parties concerned; there is great common interest in intra-regional initiatives and development. The important point is that the attempts of a few external countries to intervene on the basis of aid and interest from outside

are in vain if the recipient countries themselves and their stakeholders are not interested in development (Miszlivetz, 2024). The V4 is also working on this.

CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH AND THE V4 IDENTITY

Constructivism refers to a theoretical viewpoint within the field of international relations that focuses on the principle of identity. The constructivist theory explains that states and other players in the international system behave according to their identities, norms, and beliefs. It is also important to note that the constructivist approach highlights the dynamic nature of identity construction, emphasizing ongoing processes influenced by interactions, shared narratives, and evolving historical contexts (Mengshu, 2020). Constructivists believe that states' identity is rather socially constructed than controlled by power and material beliefs. Constructivists understand that identity can be transformed through time and transferred in a given social and geographical context. In the course of history, nations' identities changed constantly. However, some features have never been, or they take infinite time to transform into something similar, easily traceable (Mengshu, 2020).

In this essay, constructivist ideas gain more focus since the identities of V4s and WBs have been researched, as mentioned previously. Constructivism has two main branches: conventional and critical constructivism. The first, conventional constructivism, examines why states or actors act in a certain way in the international system and acknowledges the centrality of states in international relations. Also, they argue that the state's behaviour emerges from its identity. Therefore, their behaviour can be predicted through their identity (Jung, 2019). The second, critical constructivism, examines how a state's identity is constructed and what factors contribute to the structure of the identity of the given state. They argue that the base of the identity is built up through communication among its citizens, and they also consider important factors such as language and the reality of meaning (Jung, 2019).

The V4's actions in the Western Balkans can be considered from both constructivist approaches; however, in this essay, conventional constructivism is going to be in focus. Critical constructivism is present only in the sense of how results remain in the public domain. The V4 initiatives are important and significant from a critical point because they are talked about, and the actors involved in the policies are aware that the support for the programmes that affect them is the result of the V4 and WB relations and cooperation.

Conventional constructivism is more significant in the sense of how this study processes the V4 initiatives towards the Western Balkans. As the idea puts an emphasis on identity and socially constructed norms that shape and form state actions, the V4 cooperation framework can be examined thoroughly from this aspect, as the cooperation is based on common interest, history and identity. The V4's cooperative behaviour can be understood because all countries commonly own the Central European shared identity, and their aim is to prosper; thereby, their identity flourishes as well. This causes a spill-over effect, which, considered interests, leads to a spur of development in the given region (Herța & Corpădean, 2018).

Moreover, conventional constructivism emphasizes how socialization, and the spread of norms influence state conduct inside the international system. Member states absorb common norms and identities through continuous exchanges and engagements inside the V4 framework, which in turn affects their preferences, perceptions, and decision-making processes. As member states align their conduct with the common norms and values of the V4 identity, the socialization process strengthens the group's cohesiveness and increases its ability for collective action in the WB region too (Braun, 2020).

As a neighbouring region and another one undergoing similar historical events and grievances, the Western Balkan countries carry resembling mentalities and identities as the ones in the Visegrad region. This connection played a major role in the development of connectivity, cooperation, and alliances between the two groups of countries, which are still a dominant feature of foreign policy in both regions today (Madhi et al, 2013).

These identities, norms, and beliefs can emerge from both history and the states' political affairs. In the following part of the research, a summary of the Visegrad Group states' historical and political identity is going to be presented. Following that, these abovementioned transferring identities are going to be placed in the centre of this research in the context of the V4 identity's transfer to the Western Balkans by posing the question of whether it has happened at all since the Western Balkan's Europeanisation is likely to be multi-factorial, and not just a success of the proximity and influence of the Visegrad countries. Is it possible that the imprint of the V4 countries' identities has helped to shape Western values in the Western Balkans? Has the V4 played an important role as a bridge between the Western Balkans and the EU?

In the next paragraphs I am going to answer these questions to understand the V4's agenda towards the Western Balkans from a constructivist perspective.

HISTORICAL IDENTITY OF THE VISEGRAD GROUP

From a constructivist perspective, historical identity is one of the most important aspects that influence a state's aspirations for power and influence. This identity, in the context of the Central European region and Visegrad cooperation, stems from shared historical experiences, worldviews, methods of thinking, and cultural affinities, while they share an immense amount of similarities in terms of history and morphology (Cabada, 2018). These countries have a history of geographical proximity and common historical ties, including both collaborative periods and conflicts. Starting from the countries' cooperation in the year 1335 and through the post-communist transition era, common history has built its collective identity to the extent that these nations acknowledge their common challenges and experiences by undergoing political and economic transformations together (MFA Hungary, 2021). The shared experiences of transitioning from communism to democracy contribute to a sense of regional identity, too, as does their collaboration within the Visegrád Group. Furthermore, cultural and linguistic affinities among the V4 countries further enhance the perception of a shared regional identity.

The beginning or establishment of the V4 was marked by an ambition to establish functional democracies on the reminders of socialist regimes. However, this transition was fraught with challenges such as economic instability, record-high unemployment rates, and the resurfacing of deep-rooted ethnic and territorial disputes, particularly evident in the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia. The V4's cohesion and adaptability were put to the test with the later inclusion of the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

The Visegrad countries consider their development to be late. However, this disobedience and delay are now recognized as a useful backlog since using it in helping the WB countries for examining Western trends first before implementation. Coupled with this, the delay has slowed down modernization a little, retaining the cultural, historical, and religious traditions in the countries that are establishing the very basis of the identity of a large percentage of their population (Wiszniowski & Glinka, 2020).

The evolution of the V4 was punctuated by internal disputes and bilateral tensions, notably between Slovakia and Hungary. The early years of Slovakia's independence were marked by a contentious national identity narrative and policies perceived as discriminatory towards ethnic minorities, aggravating Slovak-Hungarian relations. Environmental and resource management issues, such as the dispute over the Bős-Nagymaros dam, further strained these relations (Loedel, 2019). However, the late 1990s witnessed a transformative shift in the political landscapes of both countries, paving the way for a more conciliatory and cooperative bilateral relationship.

In contrast, Poland's post-transition journey was primarily focused on securing its national security and economic prosperity through NATO and EU accession. Despite its complex relations with Germany and Russia, Poland's economic resilience and strategic diplomacy enabled it to navigate these bilateral relations effectively (Szitás, 2021). Within the V4 framework, Polish-Hungarian ties have traditionally been powerful, strengthened by shared historical experiences and the absence of major conflicting interests.

The last decade's transformation is attributed to the recognition that the V4 countries, despite their individual strengths, wield greater influence and can better safeguard their interests when acting as a group. The 2015 migration crisis was a testament to the V4's collective consciousness, where their united stance against the EU's quota system highlighted their commitment to national sovereignty and the principle of subsidiarity within the EU framework (Szitás, 2021).

Additionally, the V4 countries' engagement in European integration and their interactions with other European nations play a role in shaping their collective identity.

Political identity of the Visegrad Group

Political identity influences how states interpret and adhere to international norms and rules, with compliance often driven by the desire to maintain a positive self-image or align with perceived identity-related norms. Constructivism asserts that a state's political identity plays a considerable role in shaping its behaviour on the global stage, guiding actions that align with its identity and prompting resistance to those perceived as conflicting (Levkovska & Franklin, 2011). Furthermore, constructivism recognizes the potential for change in political identity over time. States may go under identity transformations through learning, socialization, or exposure to new ideas. Diplomacy, communication, and interactions among actors are instrumental in shaping and reinforcing political identity. Ideas of constructivists provide a dynamic framework that highlight the role of ideas and identity in international relations, offering insights into the motivations behind state actions and the ways in which shared beliefs shape the evolving landscape of global politics.

Concerning the past 30 years, all V4 countries started to take their own fate in their very hands, and more recently, they have been the driving forces of the development of their own Central and Eastern European (CEE) region. The Visegrad 4's identity depends to a large extent on the countries that are part of it (Figel, 2002). These countries - the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland - share much of what they bring from their historical identities, but also differ on many fronts, because of differences in their

historical perceptions and their current or expected position in the world order and the European structure (Rada & Gyarmati-Szijj, 2024).

The political identity of the Visegrad Group is based on similar ideals and cooperative regional efforts. Their shared commitment to solve regional problems that are important to their interests as a group is at the core of their partnership. The focus placed by the V4 on regional cooperation is a key component of their political identity. The member states proactively participate in cooperative strategies concerning politics, economy, and security with the objective of strengthening their position inside the European Union (and worldwide). The V4's primary goal was Euro-Atlantic integration as it was mentioned previously, which reflects their dedication to developing close relationships with the larger transatlantic community (Cabada & Waisová. 2018). The V4 emphasizes the value of national sovereignty while also promoting regional collaboration. Their political attitude is mostly based on concerns about maintaining distinct national identities and decision-making autonomy, particularly in the context of European integration. Another essential component of the V4's political identity is economic cooperation. The member states align their interests in economic policies and strategies by actively supporting each other's economic growth and taking part in collaborative efforts. In addition, the V4 nations frequently take a united stand on particular EU political matters, some common trends among V4 countries include a focus on national sovereignty, concerns about immigration, and a preference for preserving traditional values (Usiak, 2020; Rada, 2023; Rada, 2024; Rada & Nyilas, 2023). More conservative or nationalist political movements characterize these countries, so when it comes to issues like immigration, the rule of law, or other mutual concerns, the V4 provides a forum for these countries to jointly promote their shared stances while stating their unique viewpoints.

Seemingly, the V4's key of success can be found in their common priorities and goals concerning their place in the European construct and their focus on common principles not on the individual countries' relentless policies they are not letting go of (Balázs, 2021; Nyilas, 2023). Therefore, it fits the constructivist idea of being socially meaningful in the Central-European region, where the V4

can frame identity-related questions, territorial contexts, and political action. In this case not only the historical ties but common political and economic desires have been the motors of cooperation and development of the region (Scott, 2022).

One of the most successful areas of the joint policy is the V4's influence and expansion in the Western Balkans region. All four countries have a pre-defined interest that it represents in the region. Poland's engagement in the Western Balkans is primarily driven by its overarching concern for European security and stability. Viewing the region as a link in the broader security architecture of Europe, Poland has consistently advocated for a proactive approach to fostering stability. This strategic stance is complemented by Poland's robust support for the EU integration of Western Balkan states, a vision rooted in the belief that integration is not only a political milestone but a transformative process that solidifies democratic institutions and facilitates economic growth (Rzegocki, 2019). Economic ties between Poland and the Western Balkans have witnessed a notable upswing, with Polish investments paving the way for a deeper economic interconnection. These economic journeys are supplemented by a rich supply of cultural and historical linkages, with Poland leveraging these ties to foster a climate of mutual understanding and cooperation (Warsaw Institute, 2019).

The Czech Republic's engagement in the Western Balkans is governed in its commitment to cultivating economic cooperation and providing development aid. With a strong focus on sectors like energy, infrastructure, and engineering services, the Czech Republic has made an image for itself by strengthening its own economic interests while also improving the business climate in the region (Weber, 2023). In addition to its economic activities, the Czech Republic's development aid shows its dedication to promoting institutional reforms and sustainable development in the Western Balkans. This strategy is a calculated bet on the security and prosperity of the area as well as a reflection of the foreign policy character of the Czech Republic. The Czech Republic and the Western Balkans can now collaborate and understand each other better thanks to the cultural and educational exchanges that have strengthened their ties even further (Subrtova, 2022).

Slovakia takes a balanced approach to its involvement in the Western Balkans, prioritizing economic interest, political stability, and the defence of minority rights. Slovakia shares its transition experience and pushes for political changes and the preservation of the rule of law, providing important insights into the democracy and integration processes. The nation's trade and investment ties with the region, especially in fields like information technology, energy, and the automobile industry, reflect its financial priorities in the area. Slovakia's attention on the Western Balkan countries' EU and NATO integration further illustrates its dedication to making it a stable and prosperous area. Slovakia is dedicated to maintaining a comprehensive approach to stability that takes into account not just political and economic aspects but also the cultural and social context of the Western Balkans. This is made clear by the emphasis on minority rights, which comes from the country's own history (Baculáková, 2021).

HUNGARIAN OBJECTIVES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

After examining other Visegrád countries interests in the Western Balkans region, I am going to highlight Hungary's interests in the WB area, as the country seems to be the most dedicated among the V4 towards its EU integration (Rada, 2018; Rada, 2019; Rada, 2020). Hungary, being the V4 country situated nearest to the Western Balkans, has a considerable ethnic Hungarian population in Serbia for which it feels a sense of responsibility. Consequently, it is natural for Hungarians to prioritize sustaining stable political and economic ties with nations within the Western Balkans.

Historically, Hungary's EU presidency in the first half of 2011 focused on EU enlargement, with the goal of completing Croatia's accession discussions, obtaining a European Commission proposal for Serbia, and maybe beginning talks with Macedonia. Hungary's presidency program included investigating the role of Central Europe, particularly non-Eurozone countries, in Europe. The Hungarian administration campaigned for more attention to the Western Balkans region by important EU decision-makers, as well as a stronger Central Europe policy. It suggested that, in reaction to crises, engagement with these nations should try to promote Euro-

pean society's shared identity, emphasizing Hungary's commitment to stability in the region and integration within the larger European framework. (Griessler, 2018).

Economically, Hungary sees the Western Balkans, particularly Serbia, as a vital area for its foreign investments. The Hungarian government is actively developing investment structures to encourage high-quality growth in the region. These initiatives include developing targeted economic and investment plans, minimizing overlaps in institutional and tender processes, and increasing the Hungarian business community's grasp of the local context. The expansion and quantitative and qualitative enhancement of Outward Foreign Direct Investments (OFDIs) to the Western Balkans necessitates a review of present, unwritten trade and investment plans and support systems, as well as the identification of expertise gaps concerning the region. This re-evaluation will allow Hungary to provide sector-specific aid to areas that can sustain their competitiveness in the Western Balkans despite increased market competition. These strategies aim to reinforce sectors where Hungary may utilize competitive advantages to build a lasting economic presence. (Ármás & Németh, 2022).

Because of the region's flammable history and present sociopolitical issues, Hungary prioritizes security in the Western Balkans. Accelerating EU acceptance for Western Balkan countries is seen critical for mitigating security dangers, and Hungary considers it a national security objective. Hungary strongly supports the EU's enlargement policy, which acts as a weapon for ensuring regional stability and dealing with possible crises such as migration, radicalism, and the geopolitical impact of external powers like as Russia and Turkey. (Gosztonyi, 2006)

In addition, the EU's cautious approach to enlargement following the accession of Bulgaria and Romania has highlighted the need of adhering to the Copenhagen criteria, which include the preservation of minority rights—a vital issue for Hungary given its ethnic relations in the region. Hungary pushes for consistent preservation of minority rights in Serbia and other accession countries to ensure that these criteria are met throughout their EU integration procedures (Gosztonyi, 2006).

Finally, Hungary's strategic aims in the Western Balkans are multifaceted, with a focus on regional stability, economic integration, and the preservation of ethnic Hungarian minorities. These goals are consistent with the EU's broader interests of maintaining a stable and peaceful region.

Hungary's approach to the Western Balkans is characterized by a blend of energy security, economic interest, and diplomatic influence. The country's strategic interest in energy diversification, particularly reducing its reliance on Russian gas, has positioned the Western Balkans as a crucial point in its energy security calculus (Scheffer, 2024). This pragmatic energy policy matches with Hungary's broader economic strategy in the region, marked by significant investments in sectors such as banking and media. Moreover, Hungary's support for the EU and NATO integration of Western Balkan countries reflects its intent to mould a stable neighbourhood, a proof to its proactive diplomacy. Hungary's efforts to capitalize on historical ties to strengthen its influence and serve as a bridge between the EU and the Western Balkans complement this diverse engagement and highlight Hungary's interest to act as a major performer in the region's European journey (DNH, 2024).

These interests are towering up year by year making the WB region more developed in terms of economy and Europeanization and the V4 posing as the regional leader or centre of the Central and Eastern European community. However, the identity-formation of the V4 collides into difficulties when defining itself in the European context. They consider themselves as a part of the West, however the West consider them as part of the East. The countries now remained between two chairs, forming both a gap and a bridge between the current Eastern and Western worldviews (Balázs, 2021).

Similarly, a little further south, the Western Balkan countries are similarly caught between two conflicting ideas of East and West, currently in the early stages of European accession, trying to find allies to support their North Atlantic integration as a mutual handhold to connect them to the West.

THE VISEGRAD 4 IN THE WESTERN BALKAN REGION

The Western Balkans is located south from the Visegrad Group and is made up of six countries - Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. It is a strategically important territorial priority for both V4 and for EU foreign policy, especially its enlargement policy (Strážay, 2021). The area's history is covered with storms and crises, since throughout its history, it had been a territory for interstate and intrastate wars and ethnic conflicts. As a strategic region, many wanted to control this area and shape its future during the past decades. Now the Western Balkans is open to the West, it aims for European Union membership and is cooperating with European partners to work out trade, economic and financial relations. In its Europeanization the Visegrad Group plays an enormous and indispensable role by leading by example. At both the collective Visegrad level and in their own individual foreign policies, the Western Balkans hold a unique position. The V4 nations have offered assistance in the form of knowledge transfer, drawing from their own successful experiences in political and economic transformation, regional collaboration, and Euro-Atlantic integration, to support the Western Balkans on their journey towards European integration (Damjanovski, 2023).

It can be seen so far that that the V4 and the WB6 have a lot of in common. All countries faced the same problems in the past decades – such as the socialist era, sticking between East and West, having left out of the reconstruction after World War II, developing in their own pace behind the Western hemisphere while crawling out of Eastern (Russian and Chinese) sphere of influence. They both have the CEE identity, which brings them together, and especially for the Western Balkans, belonging to CEE inherently sheds the 'Balkan' quality of the countries, elevating them a level in development. They are not yet the West but are no longer the underdeveloped post-Soviet East (Balázs, 2021).

The V4 nations welcome the European Union's enlargement strategy not only in the Western Balkans but also as a general principle. Their rationale is to ensure stability, security, and a way of development in the Central and Eastern European region. They also hold the belief that the European Union's success hinges on

the inclusion of all European countries that adhere to the Union's fundamental values, which they see as crucial for fostering European unity and bolstering its global influence (Visegrad Group, 2017). Additionally, reforming the accession process is a key focus for the Visegrad Group, aiming to facilitate the progress of Western Balkan countries towards EU membership. In a joint statement by the V4 Foreign Ministers, they emphasized the potential for parallel reforms within the Union and the integration efforts of candidate and potential candidate countries (Visegrad Group, 2019).

The V4 nations are actively engaged at various levels in supporting integration processes and negotiations, albeit with differing levels of emphasis. Nonetheless, each country can be considered a consistent advocate for the EU accession aspirations of the region. The Visegrad Group serves as a model for Western Balkan countries in their EU accession journey and future integration. Drawing from their own experiences of societal transformation, alignment with EU values, and eventual EU membership, the V4 nations can offer leadership and support to the Western Balkans, guiding them towards successful regional cooperation and compliance with European standards.

Many of these objectives have long been part of the Visegrad Group's agenda. In their declaration, they express readiness to assist aspiring EU member states by sharing knowledge and experience, leveraging their unique regional and historical perspectives to shape EU policies towards Eastern and Southern European countries (Visegrad Group, 2004). The V4's actions and policies prioritize reinforcing civil society, supporting education, political and social transformations, and enhancing rule of law and judicial systems, all of which contribute to the accession and transformation of Western Balkan societies. This concerted effort has led to noticeable improvements in the region's standing within the international community and the European Union since the 2000s.

The V4 countries were very early to recognise the potential for cooperation and economic development that the Western Balkan countries could offer in the long term for their own and joint social and economic development. After the conflicts and the break-up of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s the Western Balkan countries sought to start their countries' reconstruction and to start their integration

to the Euro-Atlantic community (Visegrad Group, 2019). The V4 realized the strategic potential which lied in a cooperation framework; therefore, the countries of Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland began to extend relationships with their southern neighbours.

This expansion's first true milestone was the foundation of the International Visegrad Fund (IVF) in the year of 2000, which financially supports and multiplies regional cooperation and projects aimed at enhancing the European integration throughout Central Europe and the Western Balkans (Paroubek, 2006). With this tool, the V4 could easily provide financial assistance to different initiatives in the WB region in the sphere of education, civil society, transportation infrastructure, cultural exchange and many others. Besides this, the V4 countries have been actively participating in the support of the Western Balkans countries' integration to the European Union and NATO, explaining its importance by the need of stability and security in the region from their own perspectives.

According to Griessler, the V4 serves as a well-recognized brand of Central Europe, a potent soft power tool complementing its weaker hard powers. By addressing internal challenges, the V4 could deepen economic and political integration among its members, representing the region on the global political stage and providing space for the representation of small states among global players. This bolstered identity, supported by local civil societies guided by shared values, could amplify the voice of V4 countries within the European Union (Griessler, 2018). The WB stands to benefit from the promotion of EU reforms, actively supporting its aspirations for full EU membership in the near future.

It is possible, that the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans countries might be one of the most important keys of the development of the V4 and the Central Eastern European region (Tóth, 2015). In this study, I am going to introduce two different ideas on the constructivist identity and on how it is showcased in the relations of the WB region and the V4.

THE INDIVISIBLE REGION

As Hobsbawm states: "Nowhere is geography more indivisible from ideology and politics than in Central Europe, if only because, unlike the western peninsula of Eurasia known as the continent of Europe, the region has no accepted borders or definition" (Hobsbawm, 2014). This quotation highlights the complex relationship between the geography, identity and politics of Central Europe and the Western Balkans, where historical roots and geopolitical dynamics have shaped the interests and aspirations of the Visegrad 4 and the Western Balkan countries. Central Europe, characterised by unsettled borders and disputed territories, lacks a universally accepted definition that reflects the troubled geopolitical landscape of the region. It is in this context that the V4 countries, which emerged after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, seek to assert their sovereignty and promote regional cooperation. Using historical narratives of resistance and independence, they aim to strengthen their position in the European Union and NATO. Engagement with the Western Balkans is key for the V4 as they seek to expand their influence, counter competing powers and promote stability in the region. This relationship points to the indivisibility of the geography, ideology and politics of Central Europe, where historical ties and strategic imperatives determine inter-state relations (Balázs, 2021).

In contrast, the Western Balkans, where the break-up of Yugoslavia and ethnic conflicts are at the root of the conflict, have become the focus of international attention and geopolitical competition. External powers are fighting for influence for their own sakes, contributing to the complicated geopolitical landscape of the region. For the Western Balkan countries, the relationship with the V4 offers opportunities to foster economic development, strengthen security cooperation and promote European integration (Griessler, 2018). At the same time, this relationship also brings challenges, including historical grievances, ethnic tensions and diverging political interests.

Some experts argue that regional identities can also be artificially constructed, and they often make an example of the recently created and established Western Balkan identity as a whole. They also argue that regional identities, particularly in Central Europe

represented by the Visegrad Group and the Western Balkans, can become problematic when detached from the spatial and temporal dimensions of geography. Emphasizing the dangers of relying on maps with a focus on identity, it is pointed out that this tendency, prevalent in Central Europe, involves projecting history, politics, and belonging onto the map without considering the reality of geography. This practice, driven by different political decisions, obstruct the region's development and connections with neighbouring regions. In contrast, the Western Balkans face a different challenge, as the pursuit of recognition beyond being labelled as "Balkan" countries risks fragmenting the region and denying its geographical integrity, undermining political prospects. The risk of reinvented identities in both the V4 and the WB are highlighted in the literature, emphasizing the importance of considering the genuine geographical and historical context for sustainable regional development (Balázs, 2021).

Regarding the matter of identity, the central concern for Central Europe and the Balkans revolves around the possibility of establishing or sustaining a regional identity alongside a broader European identity. According to Cabada: Central Europe is the only one of the examined regions to actively try to develop its own identity (Cabada, 2020). The WB region can 'copy' this regional identity formation, as the grouping of countries strengthened the establishment of the identity, which bolstered the collective political participation and the set goals of the WB, such as European integration, etc. This is also a type of constructive influence of the V4 countries on the region since, in addition to the previously known transition moves and examples up to democratization, the V4 takes up the role of norm maker and directs its soft power towards the norm taker WB (Cabada, 2020).

In the Western Balkans region, the considerable potential of the peninsula goes unrealized when immediate national objectives overpower both the resources available and the inherent geographical considerations (Balázs, 2021).

These mutual needs play a greatly important role in forming an own regional identity, possibly by combining the aims and demands of the V4 and the WB jointly. The initiator, a group of countries or a smaller region (here, the V4) is caught between East and West

seemingly wants to develop its own identity, so it is looking for countries that are also Central-Eastern or Eastern European, like the Western Balkans, with resembling identities. These countries are not as developed as the initiator, but the journey is most likely going to be the same, by following the development path and potential of the V4, thus creating an alliance of about 10 countries (like the Berlin process) strategic space, with valuable natural resources. With this alliance, they might strengthen themselves, so in the long-term they are not going to be retrieved neither to the EU or the East and they will not be as vulnerable as they are now. However, because of the current power structure in the region and because of the fragmentation of the V4, the now vital organisations such as the EU and the NATO cannot be pushed out, nor can be replaced by the forming Central and Eastern European alliance system (Levkovska & Franklin, 2011).

The V4 and the Western Balkans have developed closer ties throughout time, encompassing topics like diplomatic discourse, security collaboration, and economic cooperation. The V4 nations have taken part in summits and regional forums with their Western Balkan neighbours, where they have addressed possibilities and difficulties in common and are seeking to work together.

If the continuous prosperity of the region wants to be ensured – which is the interest of both the V4, the WB and the EU – the region needs to exploit its potential by making sure that connectivity and cooperation is fulfilled to its maximum extent. The region is geopolitically tied together due to their shared interests and geographic closeness. In terms of security, the stability of the Western Balkans determines the stability of Central and Eastern Europe, since the spillover effects of the instability in the WB region might destabilize the wider European region through their direct neighbourhood which tends to be towards the north, the gates of the European Union (MFA Hungary, 2021).

V4 AS THE NORM MAKER AND WB AS A NORM TAKER

In the Balkans, just like in the V4 countries, progress, advocacy, and realization of development cannot be achieved by acting as independent sovereign states – as that would be too time-consuming and consume a lot of energy and resources – but it is possible to move forward within the framework of regional cooperation to climb higher in the hierarchy of more developed states.

The Western Balkans' integration into European and Atlantic structures is a unique example of norm transmission and adoption in the international system. This trend is particularly interesting in terms of the Visegrád Group's interaction with the Western Balkans. The V4 countries, with their shared experience of moving to democratic administration and integrating into European and Atlantic institutions, can serve as a model for the Western Balkans. It may be interesting to investigate how V4 norms have become widespread and influential in Western Balkan countries, the benefits that norm approval offers to the region, and the methods by which these values and standards are incorporated (Levkovska & Franklin, 2011).

The Western Balkans' journey to EU and NATO membership has been marked by significant internal reforms and external engagements that reflect the normative frameworks of the V4 countries. Some efforts are critical to aligning with fundamental European principles; for example, the push for democratization in the Western Balkans parallels the V4 countries' own transitions, emphasizing the adoption of democratic norms, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. Furthermore, the Western Balkans' participation in NATO-led missions demonstrates their commitment to collective security, which is highly valued by the V4 as well. This change from security consumers to producers is important, demonstrating the region's active commitment to increasing safety (Uvalić, 2019).

This is aligned with the V4's emphasis on stability, particularly during wartime. Adopting these principles provides numerous advantages to Western Balkan countries, including increased security in their territories. Active involvement in NATO missions and the security sector help to peace, which is critical for the region's future growth following several types of conflicts in its history. Furthermore, embracing democracy might help the Western Balkans

integrate into the EU and NATO, providing them several political and economic benefits, tough their preparedness is often called as uneven (Kittova & Steinhauser, 2018). Furthermore, these reforms strengthen the Western Balkans' reputation as trustworthy international partners. This creates new prospects for worldwide cooperation and support, thereby strengthening their international partnership-building ability (Balcer & Surroi, 2013).

Looking at specific efforts toward integrating with European and Atlantic standards and values, we can state that Western Balkan countries have already taken several actions to achieve closer alignment with the organizations mentioned above. For example, countries in the Western Balkans have actively participated in the EU accession process, which requires the acceptance and implementation of a wide variety of adjustments (Kittova & Steinhauser, 2018). For example, Serbia and Montenegro have been in membership talks with the EU for several years, with an emphasis on changes in the judiciary, public administration, and the fight against corruption and organized crime (CEDS, 2023). North Macedonia and Albania officially began EU accession talks in July 2020, marking a significant milestone in their integration aspirations (Domachowska, 2021).

Furthermore, Montenegro and North Macedonia are recent examples of Western Balkan nations joining Atlantic community structures. Montenegro joined NATO in June 2017, and North Macedonia became its 30th member in March 2020. In parallel, they are aligning their energy and environmental policies with EU norms via the Energy Community Treaty, with a focus on renewable energy, energy efficiency, and emissions reduction. Furthermore, through the EU's Stabilisation and Association Process, these countries made commitments to strengthen the rule of law, human rights, and democracy, including judicial reforms and minority protection (Toshevska-Trpchevska, 2022).

Besides to those steps, we can discuss regional cooperation efforts. For example, the Berlin Process, which began in 2014, is an initiative aiming at boosting regional cooperation among Western Balkan countries and their eventual inclusion into the EU. This process has resulted in a number of projects and agreements, including the Regional Economic Area (REA), which aims to boost the

region's competitiveness and prepare the Western Balkan economies for the internal EU market (Toshevska-Trpchevska, 2022).

Additionally, the Western Balkans have taken part in several EU projects targeted at improving education, training, youth, and sports. The Erasmus+ project, for example, has played a significant role in enhancing mobility between EU and Western Balkan institutions, therefore strengthening a sense of European identity and belonging (Vukasović, 2012).

I believe that the V4 can serve as an illustration for Western Balkan countries in the previously mentioned procedures in a variety of ways. They prioritized democratic government, demonstrated by judicial reforms and anti-corruption initiatives, which are consistent with the Copenhagen criteria for EU admission. Economic integration measures included adopting EU regulatory standards and policies to improve market competitiveness, as well as engaging in NATO for security alignment, as demonstrated by V4 membership and Western Balkans deployments to peacekeeping missions (Minic, 2016). Environmental commitment was demonstrated through the implementation of EU climate policy aimed at renewable energy and pollution reduction. Both regions aim is to encourage democratic structures in Europe while displaying a commitment to Euro-Atlantic standards and values.

The Western Balkans' incorporation into the Euro-Atlantic community demonstrates a strong harmony with broader European ideals of democracy, security cooperation, and regional stability—values that the V4 actively support and uphold. The Western Balkans are transitioning into active contributors to regional and international stability by reforming the security system, embracing democratic values, and contributing to global peacekeeping. This evolution reflects not only the success of V4 as norm makers, but also the Western Balkans' effective position as norm takers, pointing to a future of further integration and cooperation between the two sides.

THE V4 AS A BRAND

Another idea of the states was that they can showcase the V4 identity or the Visegrad Group as a brand, exploited in several areas. From the perspective of brand-building, intentional flexibility leads to the absence of a defined message at the group level. Therefore, establishing a cohesive image for the Visegrad Group proves successful only in specific policy areas aligned with declared common interests. However, in terms of EU foreign policy, the V4 serves as a positive example, particularly in promoting its expertise in European integration towards the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries (Gyárfášová & Mesežnikov, 2021). This positive brand appearance comes together when we are talking about the V4's soft power tools, mostly the International Visegrad Fund, which serves as a significant ignitor for fostering collaboration and cultural exchange among the Visegrad Group and now – with knowledge and model transfer to the Western Balkans Fund - towards the WB and the EaP region.

Most of the initiatives that serve as one leg of the brand belong to the fields of soft power, highlighting the value of common cultural heritage and touristic attractiveness, while promoting the industry of the region. The other leg, the IVF plays a important role in enhancing the V4 as a prominent cultural brand in the CEE region. It achieves this by offering financial assistance through scholarships and educational programs, supporting studies related to internal and external perception, and funding scientific publications. Finally, the IVF organizes conferences centred around V4 themes and aids in the development of key Visegrad image elements, including the logo and flag (Bagoly, 2024).

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES FOR V4-WB RELATIONS

As the Visegrad Group builds on its experience with transition and EU integration, it finds itself in an exceptional position to help the Western Balkans follow a similar route. By sharing insights and practices that helped their own EU accession, the V4 may significantly speed up the WB's path to European membership. This mentorship could include advising on judicial reforms as well as leading economic liberalization efforts, both of which are key elements in the EU integration process (Cabada, 2018). The V4's active involvement would not only accelerate the WB's entrance but

would also solidify the group's position as a crucial creator of the future of Europe.

In addition, the economic prosperity of the V4 nations serves as an inspiration for the WB, demonstrating the possible benefits of EU membership. By promoting direct investment and supporting infrastructure projects within the WB, the V4 may drive economic growth and job creation by offering a template for success that closely resembles their own post-accession progress. Also, energy security and diversification remain critical for both the V4 and the WB. Joint initiatives concentrating on renewable energy and energy efficiency can reduce dependency on external suppliers while also harmonizing with the EU's broader goals of sustainability (Tianping, 2017).

Moreover, establishing educational and cultural ties improves the interpersonal tissue between the two regions, supporting an increased respect for European values. Initiatives that promote scholarships or encourage joint cultural activities can help to overcome gaps and foster a common sense of belonging and purpose among V4 and WB youngsters. Addressing security and stability is also essential since the V4's experience with NATO integration processes might offer helpful knowledge to the WB. Joint security measures and defence collaborations can tackle common challenges, increasing the overall safety and stability of the region (Dyduch & Skorek, 2020).

A strong civil society and free media are also vital to the success of these transitions. The V4's support for programs that boost civil society organizations and improve media freedom in the Western Balkans is critical to developing transparent governance. Such initiatives serve build strong democracies that are resistant to corruption and capable of preserving citizens' rights.

The V4's support for the WB within the EU guarantees that the accession process remains a top priority, displaying a commitment to expanding the European family. By lobbying for the WB's integration, the V4 not only helps the region's European journey, but also adds to the broader narrative of a united Europe (Cabada, 2018).

The V4's presence on the Western Balkans

The International Visegrad Fund

Among the V4's efforts that aims to strengthen civil society between the member states and partners, one highly outstanding institution is the International Visegrad Fund (IVF), which is a specially designed tool that aims to strengthen the collaboration of academics, scientists and civil society groups that are based in the four member states of the V4 – Hungary, Slovakia, Poland and Czechia.

Since the IVF started to operate in 2000, it serves as a platform of joint initiatives and projects in the Central European region, in the Eastern Partnership countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine) and in the Western Balkans. This institution can be considered as the V4's prominent tool of democracy, civil society organization and fostering good relations in the spheres of education, culture and science (Hornat, 2021). The headquarters are based in Bratislava, the presumed geographical centre of the V4.

The IVF has been a donor for projects and exchange in the region, distributing over 120 million euros in the past years since its foundation, and is a driving force of cooperation among member states, organizations, and peoples in the region. It must be highlighted that this institution was way ahead of similar initiatives (as it started operating in the beginning of the 2000s) in a developing region globally, and its pre-designated aims, dynamism and vocation were unique then and are now too. In the next chapters, the IVF's importance, role and programs are going to be examined in more detail, in order to explain to the reader what components help the Western Balkan's civic development (Visegrad Fund, n.d.a).

Grants of the IVF

One significant instrument is the Visegrad+ Grants, which extend support not only to the Western Balkan countries but also to Eastern Partnership regions. The primary objective of these grants closely aligns with that of the IVF and the WBF: fostering culture, education, shared values, innovation, research and development,

public policy, democratic transition, regional, and social development. These projects and grants aim to serve as foundations for regional branding, promoting collaboration across the aforementioned fields to establish a successful developmental initiative and a robust regional framework with a solid economic foundation. This foundation would be rooted in common historical and cultural heritage and values, enhancing the visibility of Central European countries and their values on the global stage (Visegrad Fund, n.d.b).

These grants play a great role in 'exporting' rule of law, democracy and the Western European standards. They are supporting mobility and regional cooperation while strengthening the Central European identity. In the Visegrad+ Grant projects three different entities from three V4 countries or two different V4 country and one EaP or WB must be present, forming a group for the project itself. The project's outcome must stand in line with the IVF's vision and mission, it has to place sustainable regional cooperation as its main goal, since this is the first step to the promotion of civil society and the region itself.

Throughout the years these grants have focused on different areas of cooperation such as innovation, education, research and development and others previously mentioned. In the first 20 years of the operation, between 2000 and 2020, grants received almost 80% of the IVF's funding, which was distributed among seven different categories. The categories where most of the projects were implemented are culture and common identity (39%), education and capacity building (20%) regional development, tourism and environment (12%) and finally public policy and institutional partnership (11%) (Orbán, 2021).

In these projects the WB represent only a small amount, but their number has been growing consequently. In 2020 they have submitted 401 applications which were four times as much as the EaP countries (who have been participating in these programs for a longer period), of which Albania submitted 127 applications and Bosnia and Herzegovina submitted 233 (Orbán, 2021).

This grant scheme is considered as a greatly successful initiative, maybe the most successful one of the V4, however, to achieve

greater results more applications and cross-border cooperation of the Western Balkan countries are necessary.

SCHOLARSHIP INITIATIVES

A continuously expanding opportunity in the Visegrad Group-Western Balkan relations is the scholarships that are provided by the International Visegrad Fund. The scholarship programs provide a wider range of options for applicants, with standard scholarship programs offering distinct opportunities for different levels of higher education. While Bachelor students from Visegrad Four countries can only apply to V4 universities, master students have the option to choose universities in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries. Additionally, the IVF offers research grants to European archives and residency programs for artists, expanding beyond the V4 and neighbouring states to include non-EU countries like the US, Taiwan, and Japan.

Over 40% of scholarship applicants come from the V4 countries, around 49% from the EAP countries and only the remaining 9% from the Western Balkans. In the WB countries the initiative is still in its infancy, but trends suggest that this number will increase year on year (Orbán, 2021).

CIVIL SERVANTS MOBILITY PROGRAM (CSMP)

The Civil Servants Mobility Program facilitates knowledge exchange among civil servants from Eastern Partnership and Western Balkan countries, primarily through study visits to Visegrad group countries. These visits focus on sharing experiences in sectoral reforms and aligning national legislation with EU standards. By participating, government representatives enhance their personal capacities and expand networks, fostering partnerships across various sectors. Organized by the Think Visegrad consortium and funded by the International Visegrad Fund, the CSMP has hosted participants from several partner countries since its operation began in 2014. Although the 2021 edition was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, further editions aim to continue promoting dialogue and cooperation among civil servants across the region (Strážay, 2021).

By the end of 2022, more than 110 persons participated in the program, thus contributing to rule of law, the strengthening of democracy and institutions in the Western Balkan's civil and government sphere (Think Visegrad, 2023).

Western Balkan initiatives for civil society

The Western Balkan Fund

One of the most significant displays of civil society instruments in the Western Balkans is the endorsement of the Western Balkans Fund (WBF) with the assistance of the International Visegrad Fund (IVF). The WBF mirrors the IVF's structure (Western Balkans Fund, 2021).

Since the 2010s the countries of the WB region realized that a comprehensive regional initiative would benefit the countries, also taking an example from the prosperous V4 to their north. Despite the diversity of countries, this idea has significantly changed the patterns of cooperation in the region. After a series of reconciliation initiatives and mobilization, the Western Balkan Fund was established in 2015, and two years later, in 2017 it became operational via signing the Bled Statue after all contracting countries' parliaments endorsed this opportunity. During its establishment conflicts were fueled by the question of leadership and the by the future whereabouts of the headquarters. After some differences, Tirana, the capital of Albania was named as the capital city of the Western Balkans Fund, stating that in the past this city was neutral and not affected by the Yugoslavian regime (EWB Archives, 2016).

The fund facilitates collaboration between Western Balkan entities in various sectors, particularly civil society initiatives. The WBF emphasizes cooperation and shared values among the six partner countries (Serbia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro), focusing on sustainable economic development, educational exchanges, and cultural partnerships. Similar to the IVF, the WBF's funding is provided by the member countries, supports projects led by civil organizations, gov-

ernments, business associations, and cultural/educational institutions. An illustration of the countries' benefit from the IVF-supported WBF is evident in the allocation of grants. Across four WBF calls, the countries secured multiple grants, reflecting their aspirations for EU membership. The fund operates with affiliates and directors from all six countries to represent all interests of the regions (Western Balkan Fund, 2020).

To correlate with the aims of the fund's establishment, the first call for projects and proposals was called on good neighborly relations with a budget of 230,000 euros granted from the contracting partners and the Visegrad Group. The given budget for the projects' fields was divided as follows: nearly 50% was spent on projects in the field of culture and sports, 35% on education and research, 20% on sustainable development, and the others remaining focused on strengthening democracy, digitalization, and visibility (Western Balkan Fund, 2019).

Since then, 5 calls for proposals and 3 move grants have been published so far, with great amounts of projects completed and relations strengthened in the region. It can be declared that this institution accentuates the cultural and social ties between the V4 and WBF, highlighting how their mutual attraction and role modelling enhance their relationship (Western Balkan Fund, 2020).

THINK BALKANS

The Think Balkans is a cooperation instrument of the existing Western Balkan think tanks, which resembles the structure of the Think Visegrad think-tank, which was created for the same purpose.

The goal of this project is to test a system for ongoing cooperation amongst think tanks in the Western Balkans (WB), closely cooperating with and taking inspiration from the Think Visegrad – V4 Think Tank Platform. In order to achieve these goals, V4 cooperation is highlighted as a successful regional model open for knowledge exchange with EU aspirant countries. Furthermore, V4 expertise is provided to support Western Balkan regional cooperation, which is essential for European integration. People-to-people

connections are fostered between analytical institutions and government bodies from V4 and the Western Balkans, and inter-regional cooperation on issues of mutual strategic interest are nurtured. Finally, V4 know-how gained through Think Visegrad will be leveraged to improve dialogue among relevant state institutions in the WB countries (Humanity in Action, 2023).

This year, the Western Balkans Fund is launching a new program called the Joint Fellowship Program. It aims to connect researchers and scholars to receive a fully covered fellowship opportunity in Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, or Hungary. This initiative aims to provide exchange opportunities and space for cooperation beyond the recent V4 and WB options (Visegrad Fund, 2024).

Evaluation of the working initiatives on the Western Balkans

The above-mentioned initiatives in the Western Balkans, particularly the ones, with the support of the IVF, act as crucial mechanisms for enhancing and strengthening regional cooperation and civil society development. Since its founding in 2000, the IVF has been instrumental in promoting cooperation between researchers, scientists, and civil society organizations in Central Europe, the Eastern Partnership nations, and the Western Balkans (Hornat, 2021). The IVF has played a pivotal role in advancing culture, education, innovation, and regional development via programs such as the Visegrad+ Grants, therefore setting the groundwork for enduring collaboration and sustained economic expansion. Though the IVF has achieved great progress in promoting cross-border relationships, more involvement and cooperation from Western Balkan nations are required to fully realize the promise of these programs (Visegrad Fund, n.d.a).

Additionally, the IVF's public Servants Mobility Program has promoted information sharing among public servants in the Eastern Partnership and Western Balkans, improving democratic institutions and the rule of law in the area. Notwithstanding the obstacles presented by the COVID-19 epidemic, these initiatives showcase the dedication of the Visegrad Group towards fostering communication and collaboration among diverse populations. Furthermore, the IVF's assistance in the creation of the Western Balkans

Fund is a critical step in promoting shared values and improving regional cooperation among Western Balkan nations. With a structure like to that of the IVF, the WBF concentrates on funding initiatives in several fields, including as democracy, sustainable development, education, and culture (Strážay, 2021). The Western Balkan Fund seeks to fortify relations between Western Balkan nations and facilitate their assimilation into the European Union by furnishing financial resources and assistance to civic groups, governments, and cultural establishments. However, further involvement and cooperation from the Western Balkan nations as well as ongoing backing from the Visegrad Group are required for the WBF to reach its full potential.

To conclude the discussion on the V4's action in the WB region, the Western Balkans' European integration, civil society growth, and regional collaboration are all greatly assisted by the initiatives driven by the International Visegrad Fund and other Visegrad Group structures. To overcome obstacles and realize the full potential of these programs for the benefit of the area, however, persistent efforts and enhanced collaboration are needed.

THE PRESENCE OF OTHER POWERS IN THE WESTERN BALKAN REGION

In addition to the V4 nations' expanding influence and obvious rapprochement with the EU and NATO, it is critical to underline the presence of other international powers in the Western Balkans region through various diplomatic partnerships and economic investments.

Following the chaotic 1990s in the Western Balkans, the region regarded the United States, the European Union, and its member states as the key external influences. However, following 9/11, the US reduced its involvement, positioning the EU as the key driver for the region's political and socioeconomic transitions toward EU integration (Lika, 2021).

In the context of history, the United States' foreign policy toward the Western Balkans has been consistent with that of the EU, with the former calling for NATO enlargement and increased engage-

ment in the region during the past decade. The WB's history of turmoil, notably Yugoslavia's demise and the issues confronting Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia, has necessitated US action to preserve its interests and foster stability. Economic, diplomatic, and military endeavours have been crucial to US policy, particularly following the Cold War, as Washington sought to confront the political vacuum and conflict aftermath, with the Gulf Crisis serving as a notable comparison. Following the EU's unsuccessful negotiations to address the Balkan Crisis, the United States increased its position by providing major financial aid. By 1993, the Clinton administration had refreshed US policy in the Balkans, with a focus on preventing European conflicts and encouraging military cooperation. The commitment continued into the 2000s, with financial backing from accords such as the Central European Free Trade Agreement and institutions such as the Regional Cooperation Council, which emphasized post-conflict stabilization and integration (Tankosić, 2013). In the 2020s, despite differing approaches by the Trump and Biden administrations, the USA has continued to focus on promoting stability, supporting democracy, and facilitating Euro-Atlantic integration. Biden's explicit support contrasts with Trump's more indifferent stance, yet US foreign policy consistently aims to enhance regional stability and back EU enlargement efforts (Yetimoğlu & Akşemsettinoğlu, 2023).

In the WB region Russia, Turkey, China, and the Gulf States are all gaining power, raising concerns. However, these countries have a variety of, sometimes contradictory, goals, and their influence is usually exaggerated, particularly in terms of economic power. Notably, their objectives do not always contradict with those of the EU, which opens the door to mutually beneficial cooperation.

Russia's involvement is constantly being tracked because of its anti-Western activities and attempts to hinder Western Balkan integration into Euro-Atlantic frameworks, particularly through failed coups and political interference. At the political level, Russia's ruling party has formed strong alliances with many like-minded political parties in Serbia, Montenegro, Republika Srpska, and North Macedonia. Importantly, this interparty cooperation is based on a shared resistance to NATO expansion in the Western Balkans. Furthermore, Russian enterprises have established a strong position in the energy markets of Serbia and Republika

Srpska by purchasing local refineries and fuel stations, while Gazprom is the primary gas provider to the majority of Western Balkan countries. Finally, RT and Sputnik deliver services in Serbian, spreading anti-Western and pro-Russian ideas (Bieber & Tzifakis, 2019).

Despite suspicions about Erdoğan's authoritarian tendencies, Turkey's influence works with Western aspirations, as Western Balkan EU inclusion suits Turkish interests. Their involvement in the Balkans is motivated by five major considerations. The first is Turkey's common history with the Balkan peoples, which serves as a foundation for regional cooperation. The second is the large Turkish and Muslim population in the Balkans, which has formed unbreakable relationships and a natural lobby within Turkey that influences its foreign policy. The third aspect is geography; instability in the Balkans has a direct influence on Turkey, hence peace and stability in the region are priorities in Turkish foreign policy. Fourth, Turkey's involvement is driven by economic interests, with the goal of growing business and investment in the Balkans, as indicated by rising trade figures and investments. Finally, Turkey seeks Balkan friends to assist its eventual EU ambition, with growing regional power aided by past US support. These diverse factors support Turkey's extensive involvement approach in the Western Balkans (Türbedar, 2011).

China's recent entrance into the region is centered on financial engagement, with political implications via "elite capture." However, concerns about debt traps and opaque procedures point to long-term issues for the region's European integration. Their engagement with the Western Balkans is taken different shapes: bilateral relationships that foster friendly ties; the 17+1 framework, which strengthens these bilateral relationships through regional, cross-border initiatives such as the Budapest-Belgrade railway; and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which focuses on trade, investment, and connectivity while supporting European integration. China seeks to establish a comprehensive alliance that includes political, economic, educational, and scientific collaboration (Jaćimović, 2021).

Gulf State behaviours in the WB region, mostly through aid and investment, have had a limited overall impact, with fears of Islamic

radicalism not being realized to the extent expected. Saudi Arabia, like China, enters into bilateral agreements with Western Balkan states, most notably Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, focusing on arms sales with Serbia and increasing investment and tourism in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Serbia has emerged as a prominent arms trade partner, with shipments totalling $2.12 million in 2019, making it the region's largest arms exporter. For Bosnia and Herzegovina, Saudi Arabia supports Arab investment by increasing direct flights from Riyadh to Sarajevo and sponsoring luxury hotels, helping to the rise in Arab tourism, notably following the Arab Spring, making Bosnia and Herzegovina an attractive destination for the Arab middle class (Dopchie, 2022).

Despite the growing presence of emerging powers, their economic influence on the Western Balkans is much lower than that of the European Union. The EU acts as the Western Balkan states' principal trading partner, accounting for 73% of their trade, far greater than China's 5% and Russia's 4.8%, according to the Council of the European Union in 2018. Over the last decade, trade between the EU and the Western Balkans has grown significantly, doubling from €21.4 billion in 2006 to €43.6 billion in 2016 (Lika, 2021).

We can conclude that not only trade information, but also expert opinion, confirm that the Western Balkans' shift away from their Euro-Atlantic orientation is only a myth. The EU and NATO's lowered focus on the region as a result of different global and internal crises has allowed these entities to fill an investment and influence gap without diverting the Balkans' attention away from Euro-Atlantic goals. So, the previously detailed states' involvement is part of larger global plans, mainly not specific political aspirations for the Balkans. Despite worries, the presence of these nations has not significantly altered the region's orientation, highlighting the necessity for continued EU and NATO engagement to reaffirm the Western Balkans' Euro-Atlantic trajectory (Bieber & Tzifakis, 2019).

In a nutshell while the presence of these non-Western entities has increased, none provide an adequate alternative to the European road for the Western Balkans. Their impact, which is frequently overestimated, continues to pose problems to the region's

transformation and European integration. To counteract this, the EU must take a more proactive strategy, maybe with V4 playing a key role, delivering practical incentives, and overcome "accession fatigue" in order to reaffirm its position in the region and minimize external influence.

V4 COUNTRIES IN THE "BERLIN PROCESS"

The Berlin Process, which began in 2014, is an important regional cooperation mechanism aiming at supporting Western Balkans EU integration. This intergovernmental platform brings together the Western Balkan Six, Berlin Process host nations, EU institutions, international financial entities, civil society, youth, and business leaders (Németh, 2022). It facilitates fair participation and merit-based contributions from all states, ensuring that projects that benefit from the process represent their government's effectiveness and vision. The Berlin Process, which is primarily a political effort with a significant economic cooperation component, has piqued the interest of external parties such as Russia and China, both of whom have financial interests in delaying or complicating regional integration efforts. Russia has been particularly active in opposing the process, urging for a coordinated reaction to undercut the Western alliance's efforts to integrate the Western Balkans (Ginali, 2023).

The involvement of EU institutions and member states, especially Germany and France, has made the Process a reliable path to integration. Western Balkan countries face challenges and require significant reforms, particularly in combating corruption and ensuring the rule of law. Croatia, Slovenia, Czechia, Poland, and Austria's participation in the process is expected to drive reform and show their examples concerning these areas as well (Lika, 2023). Thus, as can be seen from the list, the Czech Republic and Poland were directly involved from the Visegrad countries. Hungary, along with Romania and Greece, were initially interested in joining the initiative but were not allowed to participate. Utilizing a mini-lateral format under German leadership, was designed to enhance the flexibility and political momentum of EU enlargement and integration efforts within both the EU and the Western Balkan Six (WB6), aiming for progress beyond what could be achieved through the traditional EU community approach. It introduced a

complementary approach to enlargement, not by creating new acquis or institutions or providing new funding, but by reinforcing the EU's normative approach to membership as an additive change (Marciacq, 2017).

Returning to the V4 countries' participation, Poland is considered to have played the most crucial role. During its 2019 presidency of the Berlin Process, Poland played a pivotal role in advancing the initiative's goals by organizing various activities, including civil society forums, youth events, and the cities project, being a mentor, an advisor and a partner at the time (Juzová, 2019). Besides, injecting momentum into the process amid growing skepticism, notably from France, regarding the governance of certain Western Balkan countries and the surge in asylum seekers from the region. Leveraging its positive experiences from the Visegrád Group and without unresolved regional disputes, Poland has facilitated integration efforts through agreements with Albania, Montenegro, and Serbia, and has taken a leadership position in the Three Seas Initiative, which promotes investment in the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic Sea countries. All in all, Poland's engagement could lead to a deeper cooperation that extends beyond the region's political borders. Connecting with the Polish market for tourism and professional mobility can enhance the country's position even more (Ginali, 2023).

The other V4 participant in the Berlin Process, Czechia, has also played a crucial role in bolstering civil society and law enforcement connections with the Western Balkans, leveraging its geographic proximity and shared historical and political background. Alongside Slovenia and Croatia, Czechia could serve as a bastion against Russian influence in the region, not only by participating in political forums and mediation efforts but also through collaborative oversight within the European Parliament (Ginali, 2023).

In conclusion, the Berlin Process represents one of the most significant roads for Western Balkans integration into Europe. The Process has facilitated the establishment of cooperative bridges among Western Balkan countries, addressing topics beyond the direct scope of EU accession, and provided a forum for discussing

shared challenges. It has also succeeded in re-attracting EU attention ensuring that the area continues to lead the way to developments related to the EU integration process (Tota, 2020).

LIMITATIONS

This study has certain limitations that can led back to numerous reasons. Firstly, the length of the essay is restricted to a maximum which makes the writer unable to give a proper insight to all the Western Balkan countries one by one. As a region, they can be considered together, however we cannot put aside the religious and ethnic differences, the current developmental state of the civil societies and organizations of each country. This also effects the depth of the analysis, since the countries could not be individually introduced and examined with their special features, which would lead to small-scale differences in the conclusion of their own status in terms of the examined perspectives of the study itself.

Another limitation surfaces when we are talking about the freshness of the data. The V4, the WB6 and the whole Central Eastern European region is exposed to continuous change when we are talking about political regimes, ideas and strategic movement of the surrounding powers. These organizations and the region itself have to deal with the constant power struggle that is present in the region. When this essay was submitted, all data and situations were as recent as possible, giving an updated status on the Central Eastern European in terms of the essay.

CONCLUSION

The Visegrad Group's active engagement in the Western Balkan region has been and remains one of the most important aspects of the region's democratization, civil society development, and Euro-Atlantic integration. It stems from different aspects, such as the similarities of political and historical identities, recent geostrategic elements, and geographical proximity.

This paper aimed to research these aspects to find out the reasons and driving forces behind the high level of active cooperation and good faith acceptance of these initiatives by the Western Bal-

kan region. From a constructivist perspective, the V4 identity supports its rapprochement of the Western Balkans by emphasizing the significance of common historical experiences, political goals, regional cooperation, and mutual acceptance. The V4's engagement with the Western Balkans may be interpreted through the perspective of conventional constructivism as an interaction of identity constructs that influence state conduct and interactions within the international system. The historical identity of the V4, defined by common experiences lasting centuries, cultural affinity, and close geographical proximity, offers a solid basis for collaborative aspirations aimed at promoting stability and growth in the area. Furthermore, the V4's approach to the Western Balkans is guided by its political identity, which is based on a dedication to national sovereignty, regional collaboration (again), and Euro-Atlantic integration. This strategy is consistent with the V4's larger goals within the European framework. Member states of the V4 absorb similar norms and values through ongoing contacts and engagements, influencing their decision-making processes, perceptions, and preferences. The V4 is a normative actor devoted to improving regional stability and integration, as well as expanding its influence and promoting its principles on a global scale. Its activities in the Western Balkans, which aim to advance civil society, democracy, and EU integration, reflect this character.

The Visegrad Group set its main objectives in their founding agreement were to encourage cooperation and mutual support among the member states, particularly in areas like defence, security, economy, culture, and regional development, which are essential to its character. Their interest is to channel these values to neighbouring countries and regions to develop the Central and Eastern European area. Consequently, the V4 offers numerous opportunities to organizations and civil actors to enjoy the possibilities of research and exchange programs, fellowships, and funding in order to colour the life of their own communities, thereby enhancing the image of their own country in international processes, such as the European Union integration of the Western Balkans. These opportunities are available for most people in the six countries. However, the results are going to appear in the long term.

The V4’s presence in the Western Balkans is mutually beneficial for both groups. The policies of the V4 and the good neighbourly

relations gets its member countries closer to a strategically significant area, which means the bridge to south, to the Mediterranean and to the Middle East. Secondly, by actively initiating democracy, peace and security the V4 safeguards its security interests and plays an important role in maintaining and preserving consolidation in the Western Balkans. Furthermore, the WB region offers significant economic opportunities in term of new market and trade relations, thus stimulating economic growth in the V4. Finally, it aligns with broader European objectives, particularly regarding the EU enlargement, thereby strengthening European integration.

To secure the Visegrad Group's recent goal – which is the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans – a lot needs to be done still, but with initiatives and projects, the V4 cooperation framework and with the International Visegrad Fund, can strengthen the aspects of the EU accession criteria in the Western Balkans which are necessary to achieve full integration of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

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[1] See similar logic of using constructivism as a method in: Rada, 2006; Rada, 2007; Rada & Rada, 2008; Rada, 2009a; Rada 2009b; Rada, 2011; Rada, 2012; Rada, 2013; Rada, 2022; Nyilas, 2023

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