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Dr. Christopher Walsch

## Fostering EU enlargement. Is the Visegrad Group a credible advocate?

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Author's address and affiliation:

*Dr. Christopher Walsch*

Senior Research Fellow / Donau-Institut

E-Mail: [christopher.walsch@uni-corvinus.hu](mailto:christopher.walsch@uni-corvinus.hu)

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## 1. Fostering EU enlargement. Is the Visegrad Group a credible advocate?\*

The Visegrad Four countries (V<sub>4</sub>, that is Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary) recently coordinated their efforts and were able to push common Central European interests concerning the EU budget 2014 to 2020. Leading a thematic coalition that was active in 2012 and early 2013, V<sub>4</sub> was the driving force of like-minded countries – other new and selected south European member states – to form the short-lived group of “friends of cohesion” with the aim to keep EU funds for cohesion and agricultural budgets as high as in the 2007-2013 budget period. The “friends” succeeded in their aim. EU cohesion money will flow to Central Europe generously and consistently for at least another seven years. In an earlier contribution in the Donau-Institut Working Paper Series, András Hettyey analyzed that Central and Eastern Europe are the most dedicated to further EU enlargement in the field of public opinion, while public opinion is much more sceptical in the old member states, particularly in the donor states of north-west Europe (Hettyey 2013). This paper also deals with the topic of EU enlargement.<sup>1</sup> It addresses the question of whether the Central European and the new member states – with the Visegrad countries at the core of the group – will successfully bring in their weight to influence the course of EU enlargement policy in the years to come. Are the relatively new, partly EU-skeptical, and mostly non-Eurozone member states credible advocates of further EU enlargement?

## 2. From EU-28 to EU-35?

Croatia as the 28<sup>th</sup> member plays a crucial role. It was the first country that had to fulfil not only the Copenhagen criteria, but also four specific criteria the EU established concerning the legacies of the violent conflict in the former Yugoslavia. Those are full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, respect for human and minority rights, the creation of real opportunities for refugees and internally displaced persons to return, and regional cooperation.<sup>2</sup> Successive Croatian governments since 2000 pushed this Western agenda of reconciliation despite a

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<sup>1</sup> The focus is laid on the Western Balkan countries. The cases of Iceland and Turkey will only be touched upon.

<sup>2</sup> Out of the four criteria only the condition of „regional cooperation” was a criterion that had also been valid for acceding states of Central Europe in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Regional cooperation in the Balkan area was modelled after the Central European model: the „Central European Free Trade Agreement” has later been transposed to the Western Balkan states. This free trade agreement is one of the cornerstones of South East Europe’s integration into EU’s internal market.

divided domestic public opinion in this respect. The role of Croatia as a member state will later be discussed in more detail.

Turkey, Macedonia, Iceland, Montenegro, and Serbia are candidate countries. Iceland alongside the two other European Economic Area (EEA) countries Norway and Liechtenstein could be labelled as “quasi-members” (Schimmelfennig 2010) of the EU.<sup>3</sup> Iceland, which will most likely be the EU’s 29<sup>th</sup> member, already closed some ten of the 35 chapters of the *acquis communautaire*. It is considered to be only a matter of months until negotiations close successfully once the Icesave-Bank issue with Britain and the Netherlands is solved. The only hard-nut chapter with Iceland, which is fisheries, will find an agreement both sides can stand. The stakes are higher for the others because of the Balkan war legacies and pending bilateral issues. Turkey seems to be an insurmountable case for diplomats on both sides because of its size and culture, the division of Cyprus, and an all too skeptical public opinion among EU citizens. Bosnia, Kosovo, and Albania are ‘only’ potential candidate countries, i.e. one circle farther away. Ten years passed since the Thessaloniki summit of 2003 that gave way to the prospect of EU membership for all countries that are situated in South East Europe (SEE). The prospect is also valid in 2013 and beyond, although the hurdles are higher than a decade ago (Fouéré 2013, see also section Contemporary enlargement policy and its challenges below). Montenegro looks like the easiest case to handle, whereas Serbia is the key Balkan country. A European Serbia will pave the way for Bosnia and Kosovo. It could even serve as an interlocutor between Greece and Macedonia. The German think tank *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik* predicted ten years of loneliness (“Zehn Jahre Einsamkeit”) for the candidates – ten years that have to be used for making sincere efforts by both sides (Despot / Reljić / Seufert 2012). An EU-29 with Iceland may be a reality by 2020, however an EU-35 with the Balkan states on board could hardly be considered likely before 2025.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Explaining past enlargements

Liberal intergovernmentalism and social constructivism serve as the two most powerful theoretical frameworks that explain why past enlargements, in particular the ‘big bang’ Central European

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<sup>3</sup> In Schimmelfennig’s typology Switzerland is also considered to be a „quasi member” despite not being a EEA member and having opted for a bilateral mode of cooperation with the EU.

<sup>4</sup> EU disintegration efforts by the Conservative government of Great Britain, and EU member state disintegrating tendencies, e.g. Scotland, Catalonia, Flamands and Walloons, are not discussed in this short overview. The assumption is that a majority of Britons will eventually vote in favour of the EU and that the existing West European states will prevail in their present state form despite some potential reorganisation of their domestic political systems.

enlargement of 2004, took place (Pérez-Solórzano Borragán and Juncos 2013). Liberal intergovernmentalists put member state preference formation at the centre of EU decision-making processes. The costs and benefits of socio-economic interdependence are under consideration. Old EU members saw enlargement into Central Europe as a chance at market expansion and as a great strategic asset. The acceding newcomers accepted demanding accession criteria and temporary restrictions as a payoff against long-term advantages membership would bring, e.g. political stabilisation, comparative advantages in the internal market, and solidarity in terms of cohesion funds. Social constructivists, on the contrary, argue that it was rather three complimentary – so to say much softer and less rational – propositions that can explain the inclusion of a number of post-communist states in the EU: shared values and norms in the old and acceding member states; a Western discourse of a special responsibility of the West for the former communist East; and a social learning process and norm diffusion by domestic elites in the post-communist acceding states.

Can these concepts explain enlargement to an EU-35? Liberal intergovernmentalists face a double challenge. In economic terms, further market expansion to SEE is only of minor importance. A mere twenty million new consumers with a combined purchasing power equal to the one of a richer four to five million member state is a *quantité négligeable*. Global market players in emerging markets seem to be a much better deal to focus on when it comes to trade and investment opportunities for the private sector of the EU-28 as compared to the handful of crisis-ridden and small states of SEE. Turkey, on the other hand, is a promising candidate for market oriented liberals. The other challenge is the economic crisis in the EU, which forced decision-makers to be much more inward-looking today as compared to the years of growth in the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s. Today member state governments face a stagnating economy and high unemployment, in particular among the young, therefore public opinion forces them to deal with the problems at home first at the expense of strategic decisions concerning the size of the EU. The candidate countries in SEE, however, still overwhelmingly see EU membership as their prime option, economically as well as strategically. It is the strategically thinking intergovernmentalist and the value oriented social constructivist that can still best explain further enlargement of the EU to the remaining six countries of SEE. The main issue for the EU is that this part of Europe shall be 'pacified' at last by including them as full members into the European family, which, in their eyes, is a club based on shared values. We already know that in 2014 countless commemoration ceremony speeches on the occasion of the centennial anniversary of the outbreak of World War One will recur on this theme: SEE is not a breeding ground of competing nationalisms and hence a locus of political instability, but part of a wider and integrated law-abiding Europe. Whether today's EU enlargement

policy serves as an example of or contradicts the conceptual framework laid out here will be analysed in the following section.

#### 4. Contemporary enlargement policy and its challenges

Until the early 2000s, EU-15 was a rather homogenous group of countries with similar social and economic backgrounds and also a similar political culture. The incorporation of the newcomers from EC-6 to EU-15 was comparatively easy to manage. However, with the inclusion of ten post-communist and post-transformation countries during the last decade, EU-27 has changed fundamentally.<sup>5</sup> The 2007 SEE enlargement and the prospect of membership for more SEE countries served as wake-up call for enlargement policy, of which three features can be observed. First, a „Cooperation and verification mechanism“ with the new members Romania and Bulgaria was put in place to enforce the rule of law and to better control organized crime in these two countries. In other words, existing club members were reminded to live up to the standards applicant countries are asked to fulfil. Second, based on this negative experience with these two newer members and due to similar observations in SEE applicant states, the European Commission announced a „new approach“ to enlargement in 2011. It puts the rule of law and the „absorption capacity“ on both sides at the centre of enlargement negotiations. The number of chapters went up from 31 to 35. Rule of law issues, a functioning judiciary, fighting organized crime and corruption, and the establishment of administrative structures that can cope with domestic change were now put at the centre of negotiations (European Commission 2011, 2012, 2013). The message is that the EU wishes to accompany more closely and to eventually enforce domestic change in the applicant countries, otherwise membership will fade away into a distant future. Third, the specific requirements for post-conflict SEE candidates remain in place. This has posed and will continue to pose a great challenge for Serbia and particularly Bosnia. The political leadership of the dysfunctional state of Bosnia is also urged by the EU to fundamentally reorganize the political system of the country.

Enlargement today faces several challenges. A widespread enlargement fatigue can be observed in existing member states. Public opinion turned against further enlargement in rich northwest Europe and is rather sceptical in southern Europe. Only the populations of the new member states welcome a further expansion of the EU (Hettzey 2013). A second challenge is low progress in candidate states.

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<sup>5</sup> A recently written overview of enlargement and enlargement policy is the United Kingdom’s House of Lords report *The future of EU enlargement* (House of Lords European Union Committee 2013); for information in this paragraph see ‘Chapter 2: The enlargement agenda’ (9-26).

There are high adoption costs as moves towards integration threaten the power base of local elites and their private economic interests. The way of dealing with the legacies of the conflict and open bilateral issues between Serbia and Kosovo can still stand in the way. A third challenge is the “creeping nationalization” (Hillion 2010) of the enlargement process. Existing member states have exercised tight control during the intergovernmental stages of the process, e.g. Cyprus concerning Turkey (on the issue of equal treatment of Cyprus on behalf of Turkey), Greece concerning Macedonia (on Macedonia’s ‘name issue’), Britain and the Netherlands concerning Iceland (on the issue of Icebank savings), or formerly Slovenia concerning Croatia (on unsolved border issues). Member states as club members use their asymmetrical power by unreasonably politicizing the process. Over the last few years, the informal rules of the enlargement game have changed in favour of the existing members who consider themselves free to heighten the hurdle of entrance at their discretion. A fourth challenge is the absorption capacity of the contemporary EU. The Treaty of Lisbon is not a treaty for an EU-35. More reforms in the institutional set-up will be needed. A final challenge is the economic crisis. It has an impact on the EU’s relations with SEE. Several aspects should be mentioned. The economic convergence between old and new member states slowed down. Additionally, the economic crisis hit the candidate countries - actually the more candidate countries were integrated, the harder they were hit (Bechev 2012, 4). Competition for EU-funding is considered an additional financial burden. Finally, it is EU’s economic performance (or, in the eyes of some observers, economic malaise) that erodes the EU’s attraction power. Can Visegrad Four make a difference in this rather discouraging setting? This question will be addressed in the following section.

## 5. Visegrad Four and enlargement

Visegrad cooperation has many critics due to the notorious diversity of viewpoints from the four countries’ governments in many policy areas, e.g. the diverging national pathways to achieve the Economic and Monetary Union, or the anti EU rhetoric on behalf of former presidents or current heads of government including Vaclav Klaus of the Czech Republic or Viktor Orbán of Hungary, or simply because of the little institutionalisation of the V<sub>4</sub> cooperation scheme that makes it highly inefficient. EU enlargement policy, however, points to a field of congruence. A common Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership strategy has been developed over the past years.<sup>6</sup> Enlargement

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<sup>6</sup> Details to be found in the Visegrad Group Presidency programmes. Chronologically: Slovakia – Annual Implementation Report of the Program of the Presidency of the Slovak Republic in the Visegrad Group. July



policy is one of, if not *the* preferred policy area of the Visegrad partners (Walsch 2013, Żornaczuk 2013, Král and Bartovic 2012). EU integration of more Western Balkan countries also has a double-binding effect for V<sub>4</sub>. Bringing SEE closer can vitalise cooperation in existing fields of Visegrad cooperation, e.g. energy, transport, or security and defence issues. Such is important from the legitimacy point of view of Visegrad cooperation and its institutional survival: only a V<sub>4</sub> that deals with concrete issues legitimates its sheer existence.

The features of the contemporary enlargement policy, laid out above, could be seen by V<sub>4</sub> leaders as a window of opportunity to exercise stronger influence and to take over a decision-shaping role in this EU policy area. Today's strong focus on rule of law issues and domestic change in the candidate countries may play into the hands of V<sub>4</sub> since they underwent drastic domestic change when being in candidate positions themselves ten to fifteen years ago. V<sub>4</sub> politicians may have a better understanding of local and national elites and the needs of the societies in candidate countries. The favourable public opinion and geographic proximity speaks for an active stance. Also, the "creeping nationalisation", although it can be seen as detrimental, may be given a positive spin by V<sub>4</sub> in leading a 'friends of enlargement' group concerning the integration of SEE.<sup>7</sup> Three topics are discussed in more detail in this respect: V<sub>4</sub> and Croatia, V<sub>4</sub> as a role model, and regional cooperation in Central Europe beyond the V<sub>4</sub> format.

## 5.1 Visegrad Four and a pro enlargement oriented Croatia

Croatia will be – despite its insignificance otherwise – the key EU country in the area of enlargement policy. A first test will be how well government and society can cope with initial EU membership. Economic recovery and diligent use of EU funds will play the key roles, despite Croatia's limited scope of manoeuvre concerning co-financing as deficits are running high (Koerner 2013).<sup>8</sup> EU membership will win the hearts and minds of Croatians when citizens feel a real positive difference in their everyday lives. The political input of Croatia over the last ten years to eventually achieve membership by 1 July 2013 was tremendous. As Milan Nič points out, Croatia "radically changed its political culture. It stopped disrupting state-building in neighbouring Bosnia, allowed the return of

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2010 – June 2011; Czech Republic – Report on the Czech Presidency of the Visegrad Group. July 2011 – June 2012; Poland – Programme of the Presidency. July 2012 – June 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Tomáš Strážay uses a slightly different term: "the V<sub>4</sub> countries create the core of a group of countries that can be informally called 'Friends of Enlargement Policy' [...]." (Strážay 2012, 56).

<sup>8</sup> The "excessive deficit procedure", which the European Commission can impose, may also apply against the new entrant, Croatia. See <http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/making-it-happen/country-specific-recommendations>. For challenges of Croatia as a new EU member, in particular in relation to its eastern neighbour Serbia and its southern and eastern neighbour Bosnia, see also Töglhofer (2013).

Croatian Serb refugees, engaged a Serb minority party into a government coalition and completed the extradition of all of those indicted by The Hague war crimes tribunal.” (Nič 2013, 1). Croatia today, as a club member, the author concludes, could easily “misuse its seat behind the EU table to score political points, reinforcing new divisions in the region and free riding on the huge credit and political investment behind its own EU membership.” (ibid, 2) There is, however, at present no evidence that Zagreb would like to place herself into such a veto playing role.

As a new partner the EU will watch Croatia closely. None of the EU-25 wishes to face similar difficulties as with Romania and Bulgaria post 2007. Many friends of Croatia will support the country in her European orientation. Visegrad partners proactively took over this role and presented together with Croatia a joint declaration on the eve of the Croatian accession to the EU. The five foreign ministers declared to stage “regional cooperation” at the centre of their countries’ endeavours, to cooperate closely in the fields of enlargement and neighbourhood policy, and to tackle “regional challenges of mutual concern” together (*Joint Declaration of the Foreign Ministers of the Visegrad Countries and Croatia on the Occasion of the Croatian Accession to the EU*. Budapest: 26 June 2013). This has been an excellent start for a European oriented Croatia that is reaching out for partners in the region. Visegrad cooperation with Croatia is mutually reinforcing. As relatively new EU members, Visegrad Four can share their EU experience with the new entrant, which will be to the benefit of Croatia. On the other hand, Croatia can share her experiences of recent transformation and Europeanization. Both elements of these information resources are of great value when it comes to the transfer of expertise to candidate countries in the SEE region.

## 5.2 Visegrad Four countries as role models for the Western Balkans?

Diplomats from V<sub>4</sub> and observers alike see the Central European countries that have achieved EU membership as potential role models for the candidate countries of today. Indeed, it sounds convincing that successful Central European patterns could and should be exported if helpful. Tomáš Strážay uses the header “Sharing of institutional and procedural know-how” as a key instrument of Visegrad Four influence in SEE (Strážay 2012, 57-58). He points to the regional free trade agreement in SEE that was named and modelled after the Central European Free Trade Agreement of the 1990s. Concerning present and future activities, V<sub>4</sub> policy makers point to the V<sub>4</sub> initiative of creating a “Western Balkan Fund” that is modelled after the International Visegrad Fund (IVF): an institution that finances cooperation among the partners in the fields of education, culture, and science. 2014 and 2015 will prove whether Western Balkan states are willing to adopt this idea. The IVF was established in 2000, nine years after the creation of the broader political cooperation

scheme 'Visegrad Group', that brings together countries that have shared a similar history. Presently there is no Visegrad Group-like 'Western Balkan Group', because of the obvious conflict-ridden recent history of the countries. Hence, a potential "Western Balkan Fund" will most likely start as another institution in SEE that intends to facilitate regional cooperation, similar to other recently established institutions with the same purpose and as an idea originating from outside the region.<sup>9</sup> The difference however is the 'Visegrad spin' (to be defined when established and operational) it shall get, and, more importantly, the exclusive membership of Western Balkan countries with the purpose to form a new regional platform similar to Visegrad.

A recent contribution of the Bratislava based Central European Policy Institute highlighted that V<sub>4</sub> expertise is most valuable in issues that deal with the remodelling of state–society relations and administrative procedures in the process of post-transformation and pre-accession. The four authors from the four V<sub>4</sub> countries see the role model function particularly in these fields: "Priorities should include enhancing the capacity of state administration, transferring of knowledge on economic and social transformation, reinforcing the rule of law and supporting efforts to create a functional and stable civil society." (Nič / Gyarmati / Vlkovský / Žornaczuk 2012, 5). Moreover, V<sub>4</sub>'s development assistance policies may also be better coordinated to reach, among others, these aims (Kugiel 2012).

Coordination, however, does not necessarily mean harmonizing all policies. One of the most important components of regional cooperation is information exchange.<sup>10</sup> The outcome is usually a coordinated effort to reach common goals with each actor to specialize in or focus on a particular field. Nič / Gyarmati / Vlkovský / Žornaczuk rightfully state that the Visegrad Four performance in the Balkans can be characterized as "good friends, little synergy" (2012, 4). Here the bilateral format comes into play. Building on bilateral experiences over the last twenty years, Visegrad practitioners may wish to appoint a V<sub>4</sub> lead country in certain sectors; e.g. the Czech Republic in educational exchange, Slovakia in state-building and public policy issues, Hungary in environment and/or transport, and Poland in security and defence. In addition, the bilateral format can be of help country-wise: Slovakia may have the confidence in the EU-sceptical camps of Serbia because of its

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<sup>9</sup> The Regional Cooperation Council is such an institution. Its establishment was initiated by the United States of America.

<sup>10</sup> I wish to thank Dr. Paul Luif, Österreichisches Institut für Internationale Politik, Vienna, for useful insights on the value of 'information exchange' of partners of regional cooperation. The smaller a country, the more its foreign policy practitioners are dependent on valuable information coming from outside as the resources of domestic bureaucracies and domestic experts run on a very limited scale.

non-recognition of Kosovo, or (together with Austria) a particular expertise in Bosnia that has come along with past and present EU High Commissioners coming from the two countries.<sup>11</sup>

A word of caution on the notion of 'role model' concludes this section. V<sub>4</sub> may overestimate its weight. Apart from Poland, it is a group of small countries. The former Czech foreign minister Karel Schwarzenberg once quipped that Visegrad is a "bunch of irrelevant countries".<sup>12</sup> Within the EU all four states are net recipients of cohesion funds and thus have less leverage in budget issues. So far, only Slovakia has adopted the Euro yet. Hungary and the Czech Republic plan not to adopt the common currency in the foreseeable future – a step that can be interpreted as unwillingness to join the highly integrated core of the Union. Poland had, and the Czech Republic still has, a reputation of being a veto player. Hungary's national go-it-alone policies since 2010 and prime minister Orbán's anti-EU rhetoric have received a cool reception in Brussels over the last two years, culminating in the adoption of the "Report on the situation of fundamental rights: standards and practices in Hungary" (the so-called Tavares report), which is highly critical of contemporary Hungary, by the European Parliament in June 2013.<sup>13</sup> Among many other issues, the Tavares report criticizes Hungary's confrontational political culture and the efforts of the government to control media. When such statements are read against the European Commission strategy papers on enlargement, one finds that the EU is particularly eager to support a greater consensus culture in SEE. Nearly every single candidate and potential candidate country analysis in the last three European Commission's Enlargement Strategy Reports points to the EU's satisfaction with consensus-oriented cross-party decisions (European Commission 2011, 13-20 and 31-71; European Commission 2012, 12-19 and 30-73; European Commission 2013, 14-15 and 24-45). A more specific feature is the EU's unconditional support of the freedom of expression and of media, which is considered to be a cornerstone of the EU's value system (Section in 2.2 "Ensuring freedom of expression in the media" in European Commission 2011, 6-7; European Commission 2012, 5-6 and 23; European Commission 2013, 8-11). Hence, second thoughts come up: what kind of value system do Visegrad partners (in this case

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<sup>11</sup> See section "Synergien durch Akteursrollen, Themenschnittmengen und Policyprozesse", that analyses more thoroughly, how different actors, topics, and policies can be conceptualised for the benefit of all (Walsch 2013).

<sup>12</sup> See Karel Schwarzenberg, „Ein Haufen unwichtiger Länder“, Die Presse, 17. Juli 2010. Available at [http://diepresse.com/home/politik/ausserpolitik/581883/Schwarzenberg\\_Ein-Haufen-unwichtiger-Laender?from=suche.intern.portal](http://diepresse.com/home/politik/ausserpolitik/581883/Schwarzenberg_Ein-Haufen-unwichtiger-Laender?from=suche.intern.portal) (20 November 2010).

<sup>13</sup> The report is named after the member of the European Parliament Rui Tavares, who is a member of the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs and who coordinated the writing of the report. The adoption of the report is all the more surprising because a substantial number of parliamentarians of the European Peoples Party – Orbán's own political faction – voted in favour of the report, which is available under <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//NONSGML+REPORT+A7-2013-0229+0+DOC+PDF+Vo//EN>.

Hungary) wish to export? The notion of role model becomes less credible when one or more partners question those values that club members are asking for from applicant countries. If V<sub>4</sub> wants to remain a credible and convincing actor in Brussels, the EU and SEE capitals, the only exit strategy from that deadlock is an intensified exchange of thoughts among V<sub>4</sub> about the group's identity and mission.

### 5.3 Visegrad Four and wider Central Europe: oxygen regional formats

The Visegrad Group is fortunate to operate in a wider Central Europe that is also highly in favour of enlargement. This is true for Germany, which plays a role as a benevolent hegemon, and for two smaller Euro zone countries of Austria and Slovenia, which both support every effort of SEE to come closer to the EU and, different from Germany, actively orient their foreign policies towards the region. The 'Eastern Balkans' EU members Romania and Bulgaria also support the integration of their western neighbours on the Balkan peninsula. The new EU member Croatia, as mentioned earlier, is a key player in this wider EU Central European setting. V<sub>4</sub> has the proven Visegrad Plus format at hand to actively incorporate all of these partners in select policy areas. Sectoral integration is considered to be key in the further integration of the candidate states. Visegrad Plus could function as an influential group that is actively pressing forward, e.g. a common energy community, a common transport community, or a common air space, but also issues like the freedom of services, cooperation on transnational crime, or the use of EU cohesion funds (Despot / Reljić / Seufert 2012, 7-8). Cooperation of Visegrad or Visegrad Plus with projects of the Central European Initiative (CEI), of which Hungary functions as president in 2013 and Austria in 2014, may also facilitate integration of the candidate and potential candidate countries, because all of them are members of CEI (Walsch 2013). Finally, a common institutional platform that deals with a number of *acquis communautaire* topics is the relatively new European Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR). It can serve as a perfect interface between existing and to be members of the EU with three (Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic) out of the four Visegrad partners to be involved in all structures and processes, which could be used as stepping stones into the EU by the candidate countries, facilitated and encouraged by V<sub>4</sub>.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Poland, for that matter, could function as an information source for the three partners, because of the Polish experience with the Baltic Sea Macroregional Strategy, which functions to a certain extent as a model of EUSDR.

## 6. Conclusions

Enlargement has lost momentum over the past years. New hurdles were established by the EU and some member states. Dimitar Bechev of the London based European Council on Foreign Relations even observes a detrimental “silent pact between enlargement-fatigued EU member states and rent-seeking elites in the Western Balkans who don’t mind slowing the pace of transformation [...]” (Bechev 2012, 5). This would be a sombre outlook for the Central European EU member states. The theoretical accounts on enlargement suggest that this would hardly be in the interest of the Visegrad Four countries. Rather, from a liberal intergovernmentalist point of view, it is a rational consideration for Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia (and to a lesser extent Poland) to bring in more small EU member countries in the immediate neighbourhood and with similar needs.<sup>15</sup> SEE integration will bring economic benefits for Central Europe (more so than for other parts of the EU). Visegrad Four behaviour also supports the constructivists: a peaceful and stabilised SEE with similar values in such geographical proximity is more advantageous than any other more hostile scenario, even in a setting when Western Balkan EU entrants will compete against V<sub>4</sub> countries for cohesion funding. Whether Visegrad Four countries are to be the prime exporters of values to the Balkan region is seen with some scepticism in this paper. The similar historical experience of transformation and integration speaks generally in favour, while politics on the ground on behalf of V<sub>4</sub> members speak against this notion.

The Central European EU member states – with V<sub>4</sub> at its centre and silently backed by influential Germany – are together the strongest advocates of further Balkan enlargements and can initiate new motion. V<sub>4</sub> has a number of regional and bilateral instruments at hand to pro-actively deal with the situation. The most pragmatic and functioning policy today is sectoral integration. It is the most efficient and helpful tool for adopting the *acquis* in an unpretentious and still goal-oriented process. The V<sub>4</sub> Plus formats and the newly adopted macro regional EUSDR are institutional platforms to facilitate and encourage this piecemeal process of integration and Europeanization. Central European political leaders may be able to convince EU 28 colleagues that European integration has been a story of peace, a story of freedom, and a story of democratisation in the former communist sphere of the continent. Peace and democratisation are not limited to reconciliation between France and Germany alone, but is to embrace the whole of the continent, as the jury of the Peace Nobel Prize 2012 highlighted, mentioning EU membership of Croatia, the beginning of accession

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<sup>15</sup> Poland is supportive of Balkan enlargements and expects in compensation its V<sub>4</sub> partners to support Poland’s positions in the Eastern Partnership framework (i.e. relations with Eastern neighbours, in particular Ukraine and Belarus).

negotiations with Montenegro, the prospect of the beginning of negotiations with Serbia, and even a place for Turkey in the European integration framework.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Source of Nobel Prize judgement under [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/2012/press.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2012/press.html).



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