The V4 Countries' Foreign Policy concerning the Western Balkans

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Abstract*:* *This contribution explores the Visegrad Four's (V4) foreign policy initiatives in the Western Balkans by considering each state's interests and policies and the evolution of joint V4 objectives. My underlying hypothesis is that the foreign policy-related behaviour of individual states is shaped by certain roles that they assume and by their national interests. This work uses role theory to explain the V4 states' foreign policies both generally and in the specific case of the Western Balkans. The V4 have prioritised cooperation with this region, and I analyse the programmes of the last four V4 presidencies (Slovakia 2014–2015, the Czech Republic 2015–2016, Poland 2016–2017 and Hungary 2017–2018) to reveal key foreign policy objectives and explore why they were selected. At the same time, I examine the interests of each V4 country and the reasons for their joint attention to the Western Balkan region. My analysis shows that the V4 perceive themselves as supportive and constructive EU and NATO members and see their policies as reflective of European values. Moreover, they believe they should contribute to EU enlargement by sharing experiences of economic and political transformation with the Western Balkan states and serving as role models.*

Keywords: *Visegrad Four (V4), foreign policy, national role concept, Western Balkans*

Cooperation with the Western Balkan (WB) states has been identified as a priority for the four Visegrad states (the V4), i.e. Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. The V4 have pledged to support the WB countries in their efforts to gain EU membership. They would also like to be models for the WB region. Aside from joint V4 declarations and policies, each of these states is

pursuing its own foreign policy and interests in the WB countries. This cooperation with the Western Balkans is a requirement for EU members, who are called on to improve relations with neighbouring countries and address regional problems. It is also explicitly supported by the V4 as a whole. The group recognises the value of sharing its experience of political and economic transformation and regional cooperation with the south-eastern European states that are now engaged in EU accession or rapprochement. The cooperation with the Western Balkans is, thus, being pursued on several levels.

This study aims to identify the interests of the Visegrad Four in cooperating with the Western Balkan states. The V4 are driven by a desire to apply ideas and concepts to the WB that they found useful during their own transformation. While they were never faced with state-building processes on the scale that is now affecting the WB countries, they believe their experiences can help overcome these states' problems. As the V4 countries are committed to assisting with EU enlargement, they are also supporting and promoting EU policies in the Western Balkan region.

Hill and Light (1993: 156) have described the complex factors that shape and influence foreign policy decisions:

> The overall environment in which decision-makers operate is divided into the "external" (or "international"), the "domestic" and the "psychological" environment, an umbrella term for the set of images held by decision-makers of their world, home and abroad, in contrast to its "operational reality."

My analysis focuses primarily on the "domestic" and "international" aspects of state foreign policy-making since these are the basis for the state's role as a foreign policy actor.

This study begins with an introduction to role theory, which aims to explain states' chosen priorities along with consistencies and changes in their foreign policy behaviour. I then turn to the specific national foreign policy roles that have been assumed by the V4 states. The concept of a national role refers on the one hand to a state's identity (an "ego" dimension) and on the other, to external attributions and expectations of the state (an "other" dimension). The ego part of a national or foreign policy role relates to identity, self-identification and self--image. The other dimension refers to others' interpretations and expectations and the state's position in the international system, which is accompanied by a specific set of behaviours. To identify this other dimension of the V4 countries' roles, I consider their foreign policy activities and priorities in both the regional and international contexts. Within a particular international environment, states' foreign policy behaviour is constrained by their membership of international and regional organisations, which adhere to a set of values. The fact, for example, that all V4 states are members of the EU and NATO implies

certain political behaviour that other members expect of them based on a common understanding of the values, aims and priorities of membership. Given their subjective national interests and geographical position, the V4 states are understandably the most eager promoters of Western Balkan rapprochement with the EU.

This article does not emphasise the material and structural factors (economic prosperity, population size, geographic location, availability of natural resources, etc.) that determine a country's practical capacities and foreign policy. This is because the location of these countries in the same neighbourhood and their geographical similarities mean that they tend to distinguish themselves from one another on the basis of language, culture and, to some extent, history rather than economic development or resource availability. Poland may be an exception to this rule since it is much larger than the other V4 states and seeks to become a regional power in its own right. Still, the main presumption of this article is that national identity largely determines how a nation conceives of its role and this serves, in turn, to justify and legitimate its foreign policy decisions.

Having explored how the V4 states understand their role, I need to consider their policy priorities both generally and in the specific case of the Western Balkan region. For this purpose, I analyse the most recent official foreign policy documents available from the ministries and programmes of the EU presidencies (officially known as the Presidency of the Council of the European Union)[1] with a focus on the underlying values guiding foreign policies and relations with the West Balkan region.

The final part of this study attempts to clarify the V4's role as a foreign policy actor, especially when it comes to the WB states. As such, I revisit the group's policies on the Western Balkans in the programmes of the last four Visegrad Group presidencies (i.e. Slovakia 2014–2015, the Czech Republic 2015–2016, Poland 2016–2017 and Hungary 2017–2018).

Some of the ideas and issues mentioned in this work may appear only to scratch the surface, and it is important to note the broader context against which these developments have taken place: after the EU accession of all V4 members in 2004, they decided to maintain their ccoperation and seemed to adopt a more outward-looking policy approach. Since this time, their joint foreign policies have become increasingly important and their cooperation has appeared to pursue new policy directions. The V4's policy objectives include deepening relationships with countries in their neighbourhood, i.e. the Eastern Partnership and Western Balkan states. The extension of relations with other states and regions is also actively being pursued.

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1   The Czech Republic held the EU presidency in the first half of 2009. Hungary assumed this role in the first half of 2011 and Poland did the same in the second half of 2011. The Slovak Republic held the EU presidency in the second half of 2016.

Foreign policy and the concept of a national role

This section addresses the idea of a "role" in the context of foreign policy. This concept emphasises the issues of state identity and self-perception. In this regard, the V4 group's foreign policy priorities and decisions are the work of states that have particular political and historical backgrounds and are embedded in a system of international organisations and regulations. Role theory, with its focus on identity, can explain the foreign policy choices made by the V4 group as an organisation and by its individual member states.

The underlying reasons why a state makes particular foreign policy decisions may become clearer if we take into account its self-conception, self-image and identity as well as its capacities, self-referential processes and the context in which it operates. States assume foreign policy roles that are defined by their own ideas of what their tasks and obligations should be as well as by other countries' expectations. In this respect, state behaviour is influenced by the international community, international organisations and neighbouring states. Within the foreign policy sphere, a state's conduct (role performance) also reflects its sense of its national role; the latter refers partly to its identity, cultural heritage and history (Breuning 2011: 25) and partly to its relations with the international community. As we have seen, this translates into a division into an "ego" dimension, defined as the state's identity, and an "other" dimension reflecting others' expectations and the state's position in the international system.

This notion of a role originates from the disciplines of sociology, social psychology and anthropology; it is tied to a constructivist approach and is relational. States distinguish themselves from one another and at the same time require one another's recognition (Harnisch 2011: 7). The relations among states shape and influence their concepts of their roles as foreign policy actors. Moreover these actors' world views are affected by social and cultural structures in the domestic and international environments, and those structures also affect policy decisions (Breuning 2011:16). We can, thus, see the importance of the international environment in which states operate and are embedded. Role theory looks beyond material issues such as state and population size and economic strength in seeking to explain foreign policy decisions; the focus is rather on national identity and the state's interpretation of the "collective self-understanding of citizen[s]" (Breuning 2011: 20). This is relevant because the state justifies its foreign policy actions based on its identity and expectations of fulfilling its role.

To better understand the role concept, it is worth consulting some established definitions, which also address the notion of role identity. While Holsti (1970: 238) regards a role as a set of norms that "refer to expected or appropriate behaviour," Hogg and his colleagues (1995: 256) describe a "set of expectations prescribing behaviour that is considered appropriate by others." Walker (1992:23) notes that roles are "repertoires of behaviour, inferred from others'

expectations and one's own concepts." In contrast, Harnisch (2011:7-8) stresses the origin of roles in cognitive and institutional structures as well as the "social orders or arrangements" that give meaning to particular behaviour.

As we have seen, a role reflects an actor's identity, self-conceptions and self-image (the ego aspect), or what may be summed up as *role identity*, along with the attributions and expectations of others (the other aspect). According to Hogg and colleagues (1995), role identities are "self-conceptions, self--referent[ial] cognitions that agents apply to themselves as a consequence of the social positions they occupy." Distinguishing between identities and roles is difficult, however, since the two are socially constructed based on a combination of internal dynamics and external influences. They are also very much entwined. Wendt (1999: 224) describes identities as "constituted by both internal and external structures," which is quite similar to how roles are constructed. Nevertheless, he stresses that a role identity is not the same as a role: "[r]ole-identities are subjective self-understandings; roles are objective, collectively constructed positions that give meaning to those understandings" (Wendt 1999: 259). Along the same lines, Breuning (2011:25) explains that an identity establishes "how we are," but in the case of role theory, we must also ask "what role do we play [?]" While he is critical of the practical application of role theory to foreign policy, Wendt (1999: 228) argues that when the "sovereignty of the modern state is recognized by other states, [this] means that it is now also a *role* identity with substantial rights and behavioral norms" (emphasis in the original).

Roles may be understood as *active* concepts since states take up roles that are partly self-constructed and partly assigned. In this way, their positions are at once confirmed and endorsed, instilling confidence in the state (Hogg et al. 1995: 257). Given that roles and identities are both constructed, they are also subject to change. This change is an extended process that is initiated by social learning and involves adapting to external/socal developments and the reassessment of goals and new strategies (Harnisch 2011: 10).

In consequence, a state's foreign policies may also change. These changes go hand in hand with transitions in underlying values and the state's perceptions of itself and its position in international politics. This might also alter the state's role as a foreign policy actor.

In fact, as Breuning (2011:26) argues, states design their role in foreign policy by way of "domestic sources of identity and/or cultural heritage," which means "tak[ing] advantage of material resources at their disposal, [and] circumnavigating as best as possible the obstacles imposed by their position in the international structure." Outside sources prescribing the state's role include system structures, system-wide values, general legal principles, treaty commitments and informal understandings of "world opinion." We can, thus, see how the state's conceptions of its roles (its identity or ego) and the roles prescribed for it by others relate to and influence each other. These influences are all embed-

ded in the international system that determines the state's status (Holsti 1987: 11). The structure of the international system, including its norms, rules and controls, regulates the state's behaviour and influences its role performance (Breuning 2011: 22).

The V4 are connected to and seek out exchanges with a number of international organisations. As such, the group's foreign policy decisions are guided by priorities based on foreign policy interests, and each state also pursues its own distinct foreign policies. In the next section, I consider the foreign policy interests of the V4 group and its individual member states.

National interests of the V4 states

An obstacle arises when we try to identify the ego dimension of the V4 states' foreign policy roles. This is because these identities are not clearly defined by the countries themselves.[2] On the other hand, their policy documents do offer some insights into the national values, priorities and interests that guide their foreign policy decisions.

The main motivation for setting up the Visegrad cooperation in 1991 was the desire to overcome the legacies of Communism and reduce animosities among states in the region, especially around minority protection. The V3/V4 states wanted to use this cooperation to support one another's efforts to join the EU and NATO. Their arrangement was clearly linked to these particular goals, but once they had been achieved and the cooperation judged a success, the group chose to keep working with countries in its neighbourhood.

At the same time, regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, athough encouraged by a number of regional organisations,[3] was not yet in a position to resolve disputes between states still reeling from the violent collapse of Yugoslavia. Support and advice from the V4 countries seemed to be welcome. The prevailing assumption was that the experiences of the V4 and WB were similar. Both regions had needed to cope with political and economic transformation during the 1990s and they shared the aim of becoming members of Euro-Atlantic institutions. In fact, this view that the V4 and WB states had comparable ex-

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2   To identify important elements of each state's identity, I have therefore drawn on the preambles to their Constitutions as well as their national anthems. In the case of Hungary, the key element reinforced by the state's history seems to be its position as a historical victim due to its geopolitical situation. Hungary also stresses its role as a Christian European country. In contrast, self-determination is an important aspect of Slovak national identity given Slovakia's endurance of centuries of external rule of various kinds with no chance to develop as a distinct nation, let alone one based on ethnicity. A major part of Czech identity is the civic approach to statehood and the value attached to being part of the "family of democracies in Europe and throughout the world," as the country's 1992 Constitution puts it. For Poland, sovereignty, independence, democracy and the Catholic faith are key elements of national identity.

3   These organisations included the Central European Free Trade Association (CEFTA), the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) and the Central European Initiative (CEI).

periences of political and economic transition and EU and NATO integration has occasionally been questioned (Walsch 2015: 205–224). Šabi and Freyberg--Inan (2012: 268–269) argue that it is only since 2005 that the V4 group has shown a marked interest in the WB region. Hungary began adding the WB to the agenda during its V4 presidency in 2005/6 and it continued these efforts in 2009/2010. Since then, the WB has moved to the centre of the V4's foreign policy activities. In any case, we can assume that reaching out to the former Communist countries in the neighbourhood became a foreign policy priority for the V4 after their EU accession. Tulmets (2014: 2) claims that this enabled these countries to define their "foreign policy identity in accordance with their differentiated past."

The following sections consider the foreign policy priorities of the individual V4 states. In particular, I explore their stance on the WB countries, their main foreign policy interests and the values used to justify their chosen foreign policy directions.

Hungary

Hungary is the V4 state located closest to the Western Balkan region, and there is a relatively large Hungarian minority in Serbia that Hungary feels responsible for (Šabič – Freyberg-Inan 2012: 272). Understandably, the Hungarians have an interest in maintaining stable political and economic relations with countries in the region.

After the Hungarian EU presidency in the first half of 2011, the country's foreign ministry released a review of the nation's foreign policy. This document described the ministry's aim of pursuing a "value-based foreign policy" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary 2011: 3). These values were to come from the founding documents of international organisations of which Hungary was a member, specifically the UN and EU, and from the country's 2011 Constitution, i.e. its most fundamental law (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary 2011: 4). According to these sources, the values that should guide Hungarian foreign policy fell into two main groups. The first were universal values:

> [P]eace, security, respect for international law, democracy, human rights, personal freedoms and their group expression in the form of collective (community) rights, social responsibility, the market economy, sustainable development, freedom of self-expression, freedom of the press and respect for cultural diversity. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary 2011: 4; italics in the original).

In contrast, the second group were national values such as "sovereignty and territorial integrity," "a sense of shared national belonging spanning borders" and "development of the Hungarian economy, Hungarian culture and the national

culture[s] of minorities living in Hungary" as well as the "state of Hungary's environment" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary 2011: 4).

Turning to the Western Balkans, Hungary saw EU integration as a way to stabilise the region and foster its development. Hungary, thus, expressed its intent to share its experience of "EU accession, the use of EU funds, institutional capacity-building and democratic transition" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary 2011: 22). Serbia's EU accession and potential NATO membership were matters close to Hungary's foreign policy interests, and the Hungarians, thus, pledged to support Serbia. Of equal importance were Montenegro's aspirations to join the EU and NATO, and these also had Hungarian backing. Macedonia's progress was hailed as an effort to bring stability to the entire region while Albanian developments were cited as a positive example (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary 2011: 22–23). The Hungarians, thus, stressed that the EU's enlargement to the Western Balkans was in Hungary's fundamental interest while also taking the region's ethnic divisions into consideration (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary 2011: 34).

In fact, Hungary had been engaged for many years in UN and EU missions to the Western Balkans and the 2011 document reaffirmed its commitments to the KFOR, EUFOR Althea and EULEX Kosovo projects (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary 2011: 23; Wagner 2015: 18–20).[4] The country participated in the IFOR and SFOR UN peacekeeping missions from 1995/6 until 2002. In 1999, it also became a crucial partner in NATO's war against Yugoslavia, allowing NATO aircraft to fly through its national airspace and providing troops to KFOR to protect facilities close to Pristina. Hungary's participation in EULEX in Kosovo was the largest contribution by any nation to a non-military EU mission (Wagner 2015: 18–20).

The Hungarian EU presidency in the first half of 2011 made enlargement one of its priorities. The agenda included finalising Croatia's accession negotiations, an expected European Commission recommendation about Serbia's status and the potential start of negotiations with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Hungary offered its assistance via its EU presidency role (Hungarian EU Presidency 2010/11: 4).

In its EU presidency programme, Hungary also inquired about the "place and role in Europe of our region, particularly of the countries outside the Eurozone" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary 2011: 34–35). The government responded with a clear recommendation:

> Hungary [should] strive to ensure that *Member States playing a crucial role in EU decision-making grant more attention to our region and strengthen their own Central Europe policy*, and that our cooperation with them – as a response to

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4   For an explanation of these and other acronyms related to international missions, see Table 1.

the crisis – contributes to the deepening of the common identity of European society.

(Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary 2011: 35; emphasis in original).

The Slovak Republic

Slovakia is interested in establishing bilateral relations in the Balkans and it supports the extension of EU membership to states throughout the entire region. Unlike the other V4 countries, however, Slovakia has not recognised Kosovo's independence and it departs from mainstream European policy on this issue (Šagát 2008: 46).

The Slovak aid strategy identifies Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo as priority targets in the region, mainly based on Slovak Aid's established cooperation with these states since 2003. It also assumes that the Slovak transition experience will be useful to the countries in the region (Slovak Aid 2013: 10).

In fact, Slovakia took part in a number of military missions in the Balkans including UNPROFOR in Croatia (1992–1995), UNTAES (1996–1998) in Eastern Slavonia, OSCE Kosovo Verification (1998–2001), KFOR (1999–2002) and the EU Concordia operation in Macedonia (2003). Since 2009, it has been active in the EUFOR Althea mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina and EULEX in Kosovo (Goda 2015: 44–47; Huszka 2010: 21; Ministry of the Slovak Republic n.d.).

Slovakia held the EU presidency in the second half of 2016, overseeing a programme that focused on Europe's economic recovery, migration, the expansion of the single market and the EU's engagement in world politics (Slovak presidency 2016: 2). The programme made passing reference to the Western Balkans in a section on migration issues, noting that the area was "an important region in the immediate neighbourhood of the EU." It added that "[t]he Presidency fully supports the region's European perspective and is ready to further strengthen it through [a] widening of mutual relations and through close co-operation" (Slovak presidency 2016: 9, 15). The randomness of this reference, however, suggests that the Slovak presidency lacked the leverage to prioritise EU enlargement at a time of political and economic crisis in the EU.

Slovakia continues to have an interest in the Western Balkan region and it supports these states both politically and financially with foreign aid. Furthermore, according to Huszka (2010: 24), Slovakia has been developing closer relations with Serbia. This connection is motivated by the presence of a Slovak minority in Vojvodina as well as geographic proximity and pan-Slavic sentiments.

The Czech Republic

In its 2015 document "Concept of the Czech Republic's Foreign Policy," the Czech Republic prioritised the region of South-Eastern Europe alongside

Central and Eastern Europe. The document stressed the need to keep helping Serbia and all the other Western Balkan states achieve EU membership in order to foster democratisation and stability in the region. Western Balkan states including Serbia, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina were also prioritised as recipients of foreign aid in the Czech 2010–2017 development cooperation strategy. A special development programme was agreed on for Bosnia and Herzegovina, with an emphasis on transformation and support for European integration. The assistance to Kosovo focused on social and economic development. Serbia could rely on a well-established relationship with the Czech Republic, with key cooperation projects addressing the environment as well as economic and social development (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic 2015: 14–16).

Security is an important issue for the Czech Republic, and the country has attempted to address its concerns via NATO's defence plans and the EU's framework. Stabilising the Western Balkan region is seen as essential for future security (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic 2015: 5). The 2015 foreign policy concept, thus, reiterated the Czech commitment to supporting and participating in any peacekeeping and crisis management missions undertaken by NATO, UN, EU and OSCE or other international organisations. The country has been and remains active in a number of policing and military operations in the Western Balkan region, including the EU Concordia mission in Macedonia in 2003, the EULEX mission in Kosovo, the EU Althea mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the NATO KFOR mission in Kosovo (Huszka 2010: 26; KFOR 2017).

The main focus of Czech foreign policy has, however, been the safeguarding of "dignified life," which can only be achieved through the promotion of human rights and democracy. According to the Czech Foreign Ministry, human rights can be supported by "sharing the Czech experience of the transition to democracy and [a] sustainable social market economy with transition countries and societies interested in this experience" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic 2015: 9). At the same time, Czech political cooperation has seemed to be driven by an interest in strengthening economic ties with other countries and regions including the Western Balkans (Šabič – Freyberg-Inan 2012: 272).

What is clear from the 2015 foreign policy document is that because of its size and limited resources, the Czech Republic has pursued its foreign policy agenda in association with international and regional organisations that "contribute to national security and prosperity, as well as to the preservation of the liberal-democratic constitutional architecture." Foreign policy has, thus, been "geared towards consolidating the coherence of national policies with the Czech Republic's international commitments" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic 2015: 1).

Of the values guiding Czech foreign policy, the 2015 framework states:

The[se] values […]are entirely consistent with the principles and objectives promoted by the EU in its external relations: democracy, [the] rule of law, universality, indivisibility of human rights, respect for human dignity, equality and solidarity, and respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic 2015: 2–3).

The Czech Republic took over the presidency of the European Council in the first half of 2009. Its programme mentioned EU enlargement in the Western Balkans and committed to "further strengthen[ing] the EU prospects" of these countries. It also set out a number of more specific related goals. These included making "maximal progress in the accession talks with Croatia," "improving the EU's relations with the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia," "support[ing] preparations for [the] possible granting of candidate status to other countries in the region," striving for "stability and safety in Kosovo" and "the gradual normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo," improving "Serbia's prospects of becoming a candidate country" and focusing on Bosnia and Herzegovina with a view to enhancing the EU's role in the country. The programme noted the need to prepare for the relaxation of various visa requirements if conditions were met (Czech Presidency 2009: 1). The Czech presidency also pledged to invite the WB states to join in measures to counter radicalisation and the rise of terrorism (Czech Presidency 2009: 21).

Poland

During the 1990s, Poland's priority was security. After the country joined the EU and NATO and its security was guaranteed through these memberships, it shifted its attention to supporting and fostering democracy (Zornaczuk 2009: 237).

Poland's foreign policy priorities for the period 2012–2016 focused on the world situation and the country's role in the international context. The Polish national strategy urged EU member states "to clearly identify their vision of security" (Polish Foreign Policy Priorities 2012–2016 2012: 4-16) and strengthen their position in world politics. Regional conflicts were said to be threatening peace and endangering global stability. The country, thus, stressed the need for security and signalled its readiness to play its part in the Euro-Atlantic security system. The values guiding its foreign policy were laid out as follows:

Poland's actions in the international arena are a reflection of the values that are the foundation of its statehood: democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights and solidarity. Foreign policy is meant to guard the state's independence and territorial integrity. It should act to ensure national security, to preserve its heritage, to protect its natural environment and to augment its prosperity

and high level of civilizational and economic development. (Polish Foreign Policy Priorities 2012–2016 2012: 6).

Upholding these values was said to be matter of creating "a friendly environment for countries and non-state entities." Here Poland noted that its own goals were to ensure a strong political union, remain a reliable strategic partner in the transatlantic partnership, show openness to regional cooperation and link development aid to the promotion of democracy and human rights. At the same time, it committed to promoting Poland internationally, improving relations with the Polish expat community and ensuring an effective foreign service.

Relations with Germany and France have been strategically important for Poland. These states are seen as "key political and economic partners in Europe," and thus, consultations under the 1991 Weimar Triangle framework are considered significant. Ukraine has also been named as a foreign policy priority and one that can rely on Polish support in the event of its EU and NATO rapprochement or even accession (Polish Foreign Policy Priorities 2012–2016 2012: 18). Turning to the Visegrad cooperation, Poland maintains that the V4 must speak in a single voice and consolidate their policy positions in order to promote the region's interests more effectively together (Polish Foreign Policy Priorities 2012–2016 2012: 17–19).

Bilateral relations with the Western Balkan countries have been seen as less important for Poland. This is partly because the region is not an immediate neighbour to Poland in the same way that it is to Hungary, for example. It also reflects the fact that Poland has not established intensive economic relations with these states (Zornaczuk 2009: 237, 245). Zornaczuk maintains that the country's interaction with the Western Balkans has been driven by its EU and NATO memberships. Poland supports the objectives of NATO and the EU and therefore endorses EU enlargement and NATO's "open door policy" (Zornaczuk 2009: 238). In consequence, Poland's 2012–2016 foreign policy document did not identify the state's relations with the Western Balkans, but it did name EU enlargement as a generally effective policy that had Polish support. The country took a similar position concerning the expansion of NATO membership, including to the Western Balkan states (Polish Foreign Policy Priorities 2012–2016 2012: 11–15).

While Poland was not directly affected by the Balkan Wars in the 1990s, it took part in a number of military operations in the region. Poland's army assisted UN peacekeeping operations as part of UNPROFOR (1992–1995) and UNCRO (1995–1996)[5] and it joined NATO's IFOR operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1995–1996) and later the SFOR mission. In 1999, Poland was engaged in NATO's AFOR mission in Albania. In 2003, it joined the EUFOR Concordia

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5 UNCRO was the United Nations Confidence Restore Operation, which occurred in Croatia from March 1995 until January 1996. For more information, see: http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/past/uncro.htm (4 September 2017)

mission in Macedonia and a year later it was part of the EU-led EUFOR Althea. The same year that Poland became a NATO member, it provided troops for KFOR in Kosovo. It also assisted the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe with setting up its Kosovo verification mission between October and June 1999. The UNMIK mission, which lasted from 1999 to 2008, was supported by Poland, and so too was the EU's EULEX mission, which replaced UNMIK in 2008 (Wojciech 2015: 31–33). In sum, Poland's military was involved in the Balkans from the very beginning, i.e. from the early 1990s when conflict in Croatia destabilised the region, and it remains active in EU and NATO missions in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina today.

In the second half of 2011, Poland held the presidency of the EU Council. The Polish presidency summed up its priorities as "European integration as a source of growth, [a] secure Europe and Europe benefitting from openness" (Polish EU Presidency 2011: 5). Its activities sought to stabilise the economic situation in Europe and increase the cohesion of the Union. Its programme described enlargement as a "strategic political project" of the European Union and supported efforts to help Western Balkan states fulfil their aspirations of joining the EU. The signing of an accession treaty with Croatia was named explicitly as a goal of the presidency. Outside of this, however, there were no references to the Western Balkans. In contrast, the programme highlighted the Eastern Partnership co-operation several times, describing ambitions in this area in greater detail than the EU enlargement policy on the Western Balkans. This was a clear sign that the Eastern Partnership was more important to Poland's foreign policy interests.

Zornaczuk (2009: 240, 246) argues that Poland's foreign policy is mainly influenced by its membership of international organisations. In other words, the international political structure determines Poland's understanding of its foreign policy role. While Poland is not the most eager of the V4 countries to co-operate with the Western Balkans, it conforms with the expectations and wishes of the other V4 members and supports the region's pursuit of EU and NATO integration. As an EU, NATO and V4 member, Poland also backs these goals.

Table 1   Involvement of the V4 states in international missions

COUNTRY	MISSION	DATES	COOUNTRY	ORG.
Hungary				
	IFOR (Implementation Force)	1995–1996	Bosnia and Herzegovina	NATO
	SFOR (Stabilisation Force)	1996–2002	Bosnia and Herzegovina	NATO
	KFOR (Kosovo Force)	1999–2011	Kosovo	NATO
	EUFOR / Operation Althea	since 2004	Bosnia and Herzegovina	EU
	EULEX Kosovo	since 2008	Kosovo	EU

Slovak Republic*				
	UNPROFOR (UN Protection Force)	1992–1995	Croatia	OSN
	UNTAES (UN Transitional Administration for Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium)	1996–1998	Croatia (Eastern Slavonia)	OSN
	SFOR (Stabilisation Force)	1996–2004	Bosnia and Herzegovina	NATO
	OSCE Kosovo Verification Mission	1998–2001	Kosovo	OBSE
	AFOR (Albanian Force) Allied Harbour	1999	Albania	NATO
	OMIK Mission	2000–2001	Kosovo	OBSE
	KFOR (Kosovo Force)	1999–2002	Kosovo	NATO
	EUFOR Concordia	2003	Macedonia	EU
	EUFOR / Operation Althea	since 2004	Bosnia and Herzegovina	EU
	EULEX Kosovo	since 2004	Kosovo	EU
Czech Republic**				
	UNPROFOR (UN Protection Force)	1992–1995	Bosnia and Herzegovina	OSN
	UNCRO (UN Confidence Restoration Operation)	1995–1996	Croatia, Krajina	OSN
	UNTAES (UN Transitional Administration for Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium)	1996–1998	Croatia (Eastern Slavonia)	OSN
	AFOR Albania Force Allied Harbour	1999	Albania	NATO
	IFOR (Implementation Force)	1996		NATO
	SFOR (Stabilisation Force)	1997–2001		NATO
	OSCE Kosovo Verification Mission	1998–1999	Kosovo	OBSE
	KFOR mission	1999–2002	Kosovo	NATO
	Essential Harvest	2001	Macedonia	NATO
	EUFOR Concordia	2003	Macedonia	EU
	EULEX Kosovo	since 2008	Kosovo	EU
	EUFOR / Operation Althea	2004–2008	Bosnia and Herzegovina	EU
Poland				
	UNPROFOR (UN Protection Force)	1992–1995	Bosnia and Herzegovina	OSN

	UNCRO (UN Confidence Restoration Operation)	1995–1996	Croatia	OSN
	IFOR (Implementation Force)	1995–1996	Bosnia and Herzegovina	NATO
	SFOR (Stabilisation Force)	1996–2004	Bosnia and Herzegovina	NATO
	AFOR (Albania Force) Allied Harbour	1999	Albania	NATO
	OSCE Kosovo Verification Mission	1999	Kosovo	OBSE
	KFOR (Kosovo Force)	since 1999	Kosovo	NATO
	UNMIK	1999–2008	Kosovo	OSN
	EUFOR Concordia	2003	Macedonia	EU
	EUFOR / Operation Althea	since 2004	Bosnia and Herzegovina	EU
	EULEX Kosovo	since 2008	Kosovo	EU

Sources: Compilation based on information in Goda S., ed. (2015): In search for greater v4 engagement in international crisis management, Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (SFPA), Bratislava and Huszka, B. (2010): Hungary's Western Balkan policy in the Visegrad context. EU Frontiers – Policy Paper No. 3, Centre for EU Enlargement Studies, Central European University, Budapest.

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The image and role of the V4

The examination of the last four V4 presidencies (2014–2015 Slovakia; 2015–2016 the Czech Republic; 2016–2017 Poland; 2017–2018 Hungary) in this section sheds light on the Visegrad Group's self-image. This includes the group's values and interests, its perception of its role within the EU and its policies towards the Western Balkan states. This analysis focuses initially on the elements of the V4's shared identity. I then summarise specific V4 policies that are directed at the WB states.

The V4's support for the EU integration of the WB states – in accordance with the EU enlargement process – is one of the group's policy priorities. V4 presidency programmes outline the priorities of individual presidencies as well as the long-term plans being pursued. Given the geographic proximity of these states, efforts at closer cooperation with the countries of the Eastern Partnership (i.e. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) and/or the Western Balkan region (i.e. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia) are reasonable foreign policy initiatives.

In addition, the V4 group has chosen a number of areas for its cooperation including security and defence, EU affairs and work with neighbouring regions and international organisations. The main focus has been on "coordinating positions of the V4 countries on the current European agenda" and maintaining a "strong voice in the EU" (Polish Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2016–2017: 7-8). The Slovak presidency's programme highlights this coordination process:

> We [the V4] shall also continue to support and initiate the coordination of national positions with respect to NATO and the EU. [This] also contributes to [the] better visibility of all four countries and presents a strong V4 region as an integral component of international organizations and multinational alliances. (Programme of the Slovak Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2014–2015: 24).

Given the V4's focus on strengthening military capacity and defence and security cooperation, they have emphasised "coordination of V4 standpoints in every area of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy" (Programme of the Hungarian Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2017/18 2017: 16). On this basis, the V4 agreed in 2013 to establish a V4 Battle Group under Poland's leadership (Wojciech 2013). More recently, security emerged as a central concern during the migrant crisis of the summer of 2015.

As we have seen, strengthening and deepening cooperation with the EU, NATO and other international and regional organisations and countries worldwide have been strong themes in the V4's policies. The future of the European Union is also a pressing issue (Programme of the Hungarian Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2017/18 2017: 7). As the V4 group has gained recognition, other countries have shown more interest in cooperation: "The growing international prestige of the V4 has been transposed into increased interest among third European countries and global players in cooperation with Central European countries" (Programme of the Slovak Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2014–2015: 30). Since the migrant crisis, the group has become infamous for its political critique of EU migration policies. That critique is reiterated in the programme of the 2017–2018 Hungarian presidency: "The Visegrad countries have also been strong advocates for the protection of external borders since the beginning of the migration crisis" (Hungarian Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2017: 8).

Based on this prominence and its shared position on refugee issues, the V4 group has come to see itself as a significant force within the EU. Branding has, thus, been a topic on the cooperation agenda. The group believes that "culture" is the basis for this regional branding and that this has been leading outsiders to the V4 in a kind of cultural tourism (Programme of the Slovak Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2014–2015: 43). One programme puts it:

[The] V4 has become a well-known brand – a symbol of a successful initiative for pursuing joint interests and a central element of cooperation in Central Europe. (Polish Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2016–2017: 5–6)

The same programme suggests that the group's role should be to "*effectively represent* [the] *sensitivities of EU Member States from Central Europe.*" The V4's identity, it notes, is rooted in "*a common historical heritage* and *common European values.*" The challenge is, thus, "to consolidate the *Group's identity and strengthen its external visibility*" (Polish Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2016–2017: 5–6; emphasis in the original).

The V4's Slovak presidency adds some historical perspective:

Over the years the V4 as a whole has recorded a successful shift from the periphery towards the very core of European integration. It is crucial for the V4 countries to remain at the centre of the European integration process and maintain an active influence on European policies. (Programme of the Slovak Presidency of Visegrad Group 2014–2015: 4).

A focus on fostering the "internal cohesion of the Visegrad region" is a hallmark of the Czech V4 presidency programme. The document highlights the concepts of trust and togetherness. The V4, it states, need to reaffirm the "meaningfulness" of the Visegrad cooperation. This may be done by "strengthen[ing] mutual trust and solidarity." Moreover, the "unique level of mutual trust within the V4 derives from an open exchange of opinions as well as from informal, multilayer[ed] contacts" (Czech Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2015–2016: 5–6).

This analysis of presidency programmes shows that the V4 group sees itself as a well-known brand that is the result of years of successful cooperation. The V4 have taken on the role of representing the Central European EU member states, which – as a group – have become more engaged in foreign policy, security and defence issues. At the same time, the V4 have realised that their recognisable group identity boosts their image and increases their appeal to other international actors. Interestingly, the elements of this identity are a common heritage, shared European values, similar approaches to cooperation, the pursuit of shared cultural projects and a common communication strategy.

The role assumed by the V4 states is that of a reliable partner to the EU and NATO, and they have sought to foster dialogue about EU reform on this basis. The group, thus, claims to be working for a "strong, well-functioning European Union with the aim [of] avoid[ing] further fragmentation." At the same time, they want to ensure that the V4 countries' ideas and recommendations are genuinely taken on board by all EU member states. In this vein, the Hungarian V4 presidency has argued:

> [I]nstead of the slogan "more Europe," we should focus on creating "a better and stronger Europe," a more efficient Europe. To reach this goal, it is necessary that the European Union takes into account the opinion of every Member State and pays more attention to the voice of European citizens. (Programme of the Hungarian Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2017/18 2017: 7).

Over the last few years, the V4 countries have also been advocates for the Western Balkan region. There are a number of reasons for this development. First of all, the Western Balkan states – like the Eastern Partnership countries – are the V4's neighbours. Second, the Visegrad Group has political and economic interests in the WB region. Third, improving and fostering regional cooperation with the Western Balkans are EU requirements. Fourth, the V4 states have an interest in the political stability of the region. And finally, the EU accession of the Western Balkan countries calls for reforms that will enable the adoption of the *Acquis Communautaire* into national law. The V4 can identify with the region's situation. They have, thus, branded themselves as role models who can help the WB states achieve successful economic and political transformation leading to full EU membership.

The V4 presidencies and Western Balkan policies

Under its Slovak presidency, the V4's objective was to maintain political dialogue with the Western Balkan states and provide them with financial assistance through the International Visegrad Fund. The purpose of this funding was to "promote Euro-Atlantic integration, […] strengthen local civil society and […] foster regional cooperation" (Slovak Presidency Programme 2014/2015: 5). At the same time, Slovakia expressed the general support of the V4 for countries wishing to join the EU and NATO: "V4 countries are open to shar[ing] experience and best practices regarding [the] development and implementation of sector--specific policies related to their transition and Euro-Atlantic integration." The focus was on the group's function as a role model: "The Visegrad Group remains […] ready to share with countries of the Western Balkans its considerable experience as a successful model of mutual support used in the framework of their integration processes" (Slovak Presidency Programme 2014/2015: 5, 29–30).

Under its Czech presidency from mid-2015 until mid-2016, the V4 group reaffirmed these policies on the Western Balkan region. Political support, the Czech programme noted, should be kept alive and the WB should be supported with any reforms. The International Visegrad Fund was to be used "to achieve the objectives of transferring experience with transition and supporting civil society of the V4 to the Western Balkan region." The programme approved the continuation of traditional meetings between the foreign ministers of the V4 and WB states, including Slovenia and Croatia. The V4, it said, would help found

and launch the Western Balkans Fund (WBF), an initiative based in Tirana to be modelled on the International Visegrad Fund in Bratislava (Czech Presidency Programme 2015/2016: 10–11).

The 2016/17 Polish presidency described the benefits of EU integration to the European Union and the Western Balkans alike: "The V4 will remain committed to promoting the enlargement process, strongly believing that it serves the best interest of both the EU and the enlargement countries." The programme noted that political contact between the V4 and WB states would be maintained through planned meetings with foreign ministers and in two other spheres of action. The first of these was a network (the "Network of Experts on the Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights and Enlargement Academy") set up to share the V4's experiences. The second was the political consolidation process around EU enlargement in which the goal was to "promote the principles of fair conditionality and a merit based process" (Polish V4 Presidency Programme 2016/2017: 7, 25–26).

The most recent V4 presidency under Hungary has highlighted the Western Balkan region. This priority is confirmed in the latest presidency document. Describing the V4 as a "group of countries traditionally committed to supporting the Western Balkans both in European political fora and in the form of joint projects," the programme states that the group will "actively facilitate initiatives aimed at strengthening the region's stability, security and economy under the Hungarian Presidency" (Programme of the Hungarian Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2017/18 2017: 8). At the same time, the V4 give their support "to the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkan countries as well as to the deepening of the economic integration and political association of, and cooperation with the Eastern Partnership countries, since these contribute to Europe's security and stability." This support for the EU and NATO integration of the WB states fits perfectly with the recent shift in the V4's approach to security and its developing securitisation agenda. The Hungarian presidency reasons that "[t]he key to the stability of the Western Balkans is the Euro-Atlantic integration of the region's countries." Thus, the V4 "support […] the EU and NATO enlargement processes" (Programme of the Hungarian Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2017/18 2017: 8, 13).

While the V4 are understandably motivated to cooperate with the Western Balkans for reasons of geographical proximity, it is, as Šabič and Freyberg-Inan (2012: 270) note, surprising that they have not developed a specific WB policy. Instead they continue to echo EU policy.

As we have seen, the V4 have identified the Western Balkans as a foreign policy priority separate from other regional interests such as the Eastern Partnership countries. The focus has been on supporting reform that will help WB states fulfil the criteria for EU and NATO accession. The V4 states have offered to share their experiences of Euro-Atlantic integration and they clearly see

themselves as role models for the Western Balkan countries. While all the V4 presidencies have referred to the region, the 2017/18 Hungarian programme appears to give special impetus to the V4–WB cooperation.

It is important to mention that the Visegrad Group's anti-EU image is not reflected in the policies in V4 documents. Instead the V4 emphasise the constructive work they have been undertaking as part of an EU framework and demand that their voice – while critical of certain EU policies – be taken seriously and acknowledged as equally significant to that of the "old" EU member states. The V4's objectives are to cooperate with the EU, NATO and other international or supranational organisations and to implement joint V4 policies that comply with EU regulations. At the same time, they demand to be respected as equal partners when expressing diverging standpoints on particular EU policies or their implementation.

Concluding remarks

This study has attempted to address the national identities of the Visegrad Four together with the foreign policy roles they have assumed and the impact of these identities on foreign policy. In addition, I have analysed the V4's joint policy concerning the Western Balkan states.

The V4 countries have a common history based on their Communist past and their desire to "return to Europe" after the end of the Cold War. These states decided to cooperate and support each other to achieve the shared goals of NATO and EU membership. After the EU enlargement of 2004 and their accession to NATO in 1999 (or 2004 in the case of Slovakia), the V4 confirmed their continued cooperation and began to pursue new policy goals. While V4 presidency programmes have since addressed a wide range of issues and topics, they have consistently identified the Western Balkan region as a major cooperation partner. During this time, security – whether military, economic or energy-related – has also emerged as a foreign policy priority and a key area of cooperation among the V4 states. This focus on security can be traced back to the V4's historical experience of being subordinated to other empires and reduced to client states of the Soviet Union. There is, thus, a wish for protection against external powers. The decision to establish the Visegrad Battle Group was made back in 2013 but the securitisation agenda has been pursued more eagerly since the migrant crisis in 2015.

The V4 states have assumed the role of EU and NATO members who follow the rules, regulations and values of these organisations. The image that they wish to convey is that of responsible and reliable EU partners who uphold European values but are self-confident enough to criticise the EU on specific policies. The foreign policy values of each of these states reflect their historical experiences and a general awareness that they are part of a European tradition and cultural

heritage. As such, their identities and related values are very much compatible with European values. At the same time, the V4's narratives and interpretations of EU policies have seemed to diverge from those of the majority of EU member states. There is a sense that the Visegrad Group sees itself as a victim of the relationship with "Brussels" rather than as an equal partner.

Having said this, the Visegrad Group does appear to have found its voice and purpose in representing the countries of Central Europe. The group's self-confidence has been boosted by the interest of other countries and regions in working with the V4 countries.

Values serve as guiding principles for foreign policy and they also shape identity. Democracy, freedom, human rights and the right to prosperity, security and a dignified life are some of the values underscored by the V4 countries. These states refer to these values in their foreign policy documents and have joined organisations that are rooted in similar values. The V4's foreign policies are, thus, driven by the values and commitments of international organisations. The V4 themselves have assumed the role of active participants who are truly committed to working within these formats: they are members – and act within the structures and norms – of these organisations.

While the reasons for V4 members' relations with the West Balkan region differ, there is an underlying understanding that the EU and NATO membership of the WB states will benefit these countries, the entire region and the EU. The EU's enlargement policy and NATO's open door policy are supported by the V4 states as initiatives that will stabilise and, thus, secure the region. Political and economic interests are surely also driving this close cooperation, and so too is the wish to promote EU reforms and actively assist with adapting to EU standards.

Though there has been a public perception in recent years that the V4 are pursuing anti-EU policies, the V4 states generally believe they are the EU's "good pupils" but are not recognised as such. Their alternative image as the EU's "bad boys" is currently being reinforced by V4 state leaders' negative EU commentary. Nevertheless, when it comes to the Western Balkans, the V4 are assisting with the implementation of EU policies despite perceptions otherwise. The branding of the V4 is a new group undertaking, and once their image is consolidated, a foreign policy will be designed accordingly.

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