Balkan Ambitions and Polish Inspirations:

Experiences, Problems and Challenges

Edited by
Artur Adamczyk
Goran Ilik
Kamil Zajączkowski

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From the Editors

Poland expresses a particular interest in developing friendly and stable political, economic, social, and cultural relations with the countries of the Western Balkans. It would be to Poland's absolute benefit to fully incorporate the countries of this region in Euro-Atlantic structures, since it would offer the chance of bringing stabilisation to this extremely conflict-prone region, one which may pose a threat to the security of the whole of Europe, including Poland.

The integration of the Balkans into the Euro-Atlantic structures would completely free this region from Russian influence. This is predominantly important in the context of the revival of Russian imperialism that is visible across Poland's eastern border. The accession of all Balkan states to NATO and the European Union would be tantamount to weakening Russia on the international arena, thus strengthening Poland's position as a significant regional player.

The Balkan direction is constantly present in Poland's foreign policy. It is thanks to, *inter alia*, Poland's support that some countries of this region have already joined NATO (Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia). Poland is also a member of the informal Group of Friends of EU Enlargement (also known as the Tallinn Group), which intensifies its efforts to enable other countries from the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe to accede to the European Union. A number of initiatives related to this region have also been undertaken by the Polish government as part of the Visegrad Group.

Poland particularly embraced the southern direction in its foreign policy after 2015, when relations on the north-south axis began to be developed as part of European policy and a new project – the Three Seas Initiative – was launched, which was to strengthen cooperation between EU Member States allocated between the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic seas. The geographical scope of the initiative incorporated such southern counties as Croatia and Bulgaria, but it cannot be ruled out that in the future it

may include other countries located further in the Balkans. Post 2015, Poland also intensified its bilateral relations with Montenegro, Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia, taking up an active role within the Group of Friends of EU Enlargement. Serbia remains especially important for Poland since it is the largest Balkan country located outside the EU and which is susceptible to Russian influence. In 2017, at Poland's initiative, the Belgrade Conference was established, which aimed at cooperation between the officials of both countries and sharing Poland's negotiation experience with Serbia in its EU accession efforts.

Poland's involvement in Balkan affairs was also demonstrated by its role as the host, taking up the annual chairmanship of the Berlin Process Summit in Poznań in 2019. The initiative focused on key areas that were to cement the Western Balkans with the EU: security and migration, socio-economic development, infrastructural cohesion (transport, energy), a digital agenda, good neighbourly relations, and support for the reconciliation process. The flagship project of the Berlin Process is the establishment of the Regional Economic Area, i.e., a common market in the Western Balkans emulating the EU, with the free movement of people, goods, services, and capital; an area that can be easily integrated with the EU common market.

The organisation of the Berlin Process Summit in Poznań undoubtedly proves Poland's willingness to engage in relations with the Balkan states. Poland is perceived as a prosperous country that has undergone economic, political, and social transformation, becoming a NATO member in 1999, and which conducted successful negotiations with the European Union prior to joining. Our accession and membership experiences are extremely valuable to the Balkan states applying for European Union membership. We are something of a role model, a country that has been able to safeguard its international security and the prosperity of its residents. Helping these countries and sharing our experiences may result in the creation of coalitions in the future that will support the fundamental goals of Poland's foreign policy, mainly related to the weakening of Russia's influence in Eastern and Southern Europe. Any failures in an active EU policy in the Balkan region will offer more opportunities to Russia, China, and Turkey to spread their interests there; countries that do not care about stabilising the region, but rather focus on endorsing disputes and abusing systems of corruption. Polish diplomacy should, therefore, continue providing its extensive support to the Balkan states in those areas in which it has been successful, i.e., political, economic, and legal transformation, combating corruption and organised crime, accession negotiations, and the implementation of EU funds.

There is a vital need for cooperation with opinion multipliers from the Western Balkans (universities and media), which would subsequently influence the consolidation of bilateral and regional relations and, at the same time, would promote Poland as an attractive partner for the countries of the Western Balkans.

Building a platform for cooperation between Poland and selected countries of the Western Balkans underpinned by influential academic, journalistic, and non-governmental circles will be of significant importance in shaping a positive image of Poland as a leader in Central and Eastern Europe. The transfer of experience and know-how in terms of transformation and accession negotiations could prove extremely useful to the Balkan states and help in the process of anchoring the Balkans in European cooperation structures. Academia, non-governmental organisations, and the media are the platforms for shaping social attitudes along with the mindset of the elite who will determine the future and place of the Balkan states in Europe (and in relations with Poland).

Poland remains the unquestionable spokesperson and advocate of the further enlargement of the European Union, presenting its own experience as an example proving the expediency of opening a membership prospect for the Western Balkans. This publication contributes to the implementation of Poland's foreign policy goals in the context of effectively shaping the image of Poland as a country open to economic and business cooperation, and as a leader in political and economic transformation, sharing its experiences with other countries. This book covers articles written by Polish and Balkan authors. Polish experts have focused on the presentation of experiences resulting from the economic, social, and political transformation carried out in Poland after 1989, with particular emphasis on the accession process and subsequent membership in the European Union and NATO. The authors from the Balkan states, in turn, have highlighted in their articles the greatest problems and challenges in the process of transformation and reforms conducted in their countries over the past three decades.

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(Lack of) Strategy of the EU Towards the Western Balkans – Conditions, Constraints and Weaknesses

Abstract
The chapter's main objective is to discuss the EU's international strategy towards its immediate neighbourhood, i.e. the Western Balkans. The most important driver of this strategy is undoubtedly the EU enlargement process. The research objective of this chapter is to analyse the EU's international strategy towards the Western Balkans in the context of the aspirations of the region's countries for EU membership. Presentation of the evolution of the EU enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans from the perspective of the last 20 years – describing the conditions, mechanisms and challenges associated with it. More generally, this chapter aims to understand the complex and multi-faceted process of the EU's relations with the Western Balkans. The author formulated a research hypothesis that the existing EU strategy towards the Western Balkans is not adapted to implementing the planned goals and tasks. A strategy based on the conditionality and transformative power of the EU and the Europeanisation of the region proved ineffective and unreliable.

Keywords: European Union, Enlargement Process, Western Balkans, Europeanisation, Transformative Power, Normative Power, China, Membership

Introduction

The chapter's main objective is to discuss the EU's international strategy towards its immediate neighbourhood, i.e. the Western Balkans. The most important driver of this strategy is undoubtedly the EU enlargement process. The turn of the 20th and 21st centuries initiated

a discussion and then actions of the EU regarding the further (after 2004) enlargement of the EU to include other countries, this time the Western Balkans. The European Union sought to be a global actor on the world stage (which it officially announced in 1999), and at the same time, after the war experience of the 1990s, in the Balkans, aiming to bring stability and peace to this part of Europe. European politicians believed that the further enlargement of the EU depends, among other things, on ensuring security in the Balkans. The region has also become a kind of Petri dish of international activities of the EU, thanks to which the EU has been referred to as soft power, civilian power, normative power, and, finally, transformative power. Each of these formulations shows the specificity of the EU as a global actor, undertaking the most exhaustive and comprehensive activities on the international scene, excluding military activities (the deployment of EU civilian missions or military operations within the framework of the CSDP should not be equated with this) (Zajączkowski, 2021). The EU has a "power of sorts" (Maull, 1997, p. 91). Its strengths and weaknesses result from the essence of its structure, defined by Joseph Samuel Nye as "soft power" (Wasmund, 2001, p. 14; Hurrell, 2006) and Dariusz Milczarek as a "civilian power" (Milczarek, 2003).

The research objective of this chapter is to analyse the EU's international strategy towards the Western Balkans in the context of the aspirations of the region's countries for EU membership. Presentation of the evolution of the EU enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans from the perspective of the last 20 years – describing the conditions, mechanisms and challenges associated with it. More generally, this chapter aims to understand the complex and multi-faceted process of the EU's relations with the Western Balkans. This requires: a) in the theoretical sphere, showing the EU itself as a unique participant in international relations b) in the empirical sphere, systematisation, ordering, and finally, analysis of facts and events related to the EU's policy towards this region in the designated period (2000–2022).

The chapter uses two limiters, temporal and objective. Regarding the first, this chapter focuses on the events of the 21st century. This is because the author has studied the current times. Regarding the second, the EU policy as a whole is being examined, not individual EU Member States (if they are, they are considered only in the context of the EU's external relations as a whole). Moreover, internal (Balkan) conditions are not analysed, as opposed to intra-EU and international ones. The former, if mentioned, complements the research objective of analysing the EU's policy towards the Western Balkans in terms of the EU's external relations and international strategy.

The consequence of choosing the research problem in this chapter and the set goal was the need to obtain answers to specific research questions:

- what are the dynamics of the evolution of the change in the EU's policy towards the Western Balkans in the context of enlargement?
- does the existing model of EU-Western Balkans relations make it possible in practice to implement the strategic partnership between the regions coherently and comprehensively, using all available instruments?
- to what extent do international circumstances affect the effectiveness of EU action in the region?
- what is the EU soft power phenomenon in the Western Balkans, and to what extent does this phenomenon affect the region?

Considering the above questions, the author formulated a research hypothesis that the existing EU strategy towards the Western Balkans is not adapted to implementing the planned goals and tasks. A strategy based on the conditionality and transformative power of the EU and the Europeanisation of the region proved ineffective and unreliable. It results in the following phenomena in the region: stabilitocracy and the so-called Balkan paradox. To a large extent, they consist of the fact that both the EU and the Balkan political elites (the ruling classes) are satisfied with the *status quo* regarding the accession negotiations process. This means there is not enough political will and consent among the EU politicians to speed up the enlargement process. In turn, the rulers in the Balkans transform their countries only to a minimal extent, as far as maintaining proper relations with the EU, guaranteeing the inflow of EU funds requires it. Balkan politicians are focused on maintaining (and expanding) their political power rather than on the process of EU alignment.

From Enthusiasm Through Fatigue to Pragmatic and Geopolitical Cooperation

The issue of EU enlargement to the Western Balkan countries has become a matter of interest in Brussels since the late 20th and early 21st centuries. However, its importance on the EU and Member States' agenda from the perspective of the last 20 years has varied and seemed changeable. This was due, on the one hand, to the situation within the EU, on the other hand, to the international situation, especially in the immediate neighbourhood, and thirdly to the situation in the Balkan states themselves. Concerning the first two determinants, it should be stated that the EU entered the 21st century as an entity with fairly well-defined international

goals, strengthened by the successful introduction of the euro into international circulation, a stable economic situation and the successful accession process of 10 countries to European structures. The EU aspired to be a fully-fledged global actor with a robust economic base and a robust political-military component (weaknesses in this respect were highlighted by the Balkan wars of the 1990s). This was reflected in the emergence of the CSDP and the pursuit of strategic independence from the US partner (this became apparent in particular during the 2003 Iraqi conflict). The beginning of the 21st century also saw the construction of a more federal rather than confederal Europe, as manifested during the work on the EU Constitutional Treaty. In its international strategy towards third countries, including the Western Balkans, the EU has been guided by principles and ideas based primarily on liberalism and constructivism. The first decade of the 21st century saw the culmination of the EU's international activities as a normative and civilian power. A particular enthusiasm for further enlargement of the EU to the Balkans did not stem somewhat from a positive attitude towards the region's countries but rather from a desire and belief that the EU was entering a phase of building its position as a global actor on the international stage. At the same time, there was a conviction among the EU's political elite that no further development of the EU was possible without ensuring stability and security in the immediate neighbourhood. This is a *sine qua non*-condition. Thus, the years 2000–2007/2008 were marked by numerous declarations and the establishment of an institutional framework in EU-Western Balkans relations (including, among other things, the adoption of the Thessaloniki Agenda for the Western Balkans, in which the EU presented the Balkan states with a clear prospect of membership in its structures for the first time). As part of the Stability and Association Process (SAP), the Union signed a Stability and Association Agreement with individual countries. This enthusiasm, as well as an inevitable institutionalisation of EU-Balkan relations, did not imply and was not the same as a political decision to define a time perspective for the possible accession of the Balkan states. 2008–2018 is a period in EU-Western Balkans relations characterised by stagnation and lack of dynamism. The Balkan states only fulfilled previous agreements between the parties; there was no objective European perspective. After the admission of Romania and Bulgaria to the EU in 2007, there was a perception among the Member States and the EU institutions that the enlargement process should be significantly reduced or even halted (Adamczyk, 2018, pp. 130–131). This belief intensified with the 2008 economic crisis and its negative consequences for the EU. The crisis has highlighted structural problems within the EU, particularly in

the economic sphere, and thus the need for significant changes in this area. At the same time, the phenomenon of so-called fatigue with cooperation with the Balkan states has intensified. European states felt impatient with the results of the talks with countries in the region so far. The international environment, especially the immediate neighbourhood, was also undergoing a significant transformation – first its southern aspect (The Arab Spring), then its eastern one. The conditions mentioned above and internal problems within the Balkan states themselves meant that the enlargement issue was relegated to the back of the EU's agenda. The EU's position during this period is best illustrated by a statement made by Jean-Claude Juncker in 2014 when he took over as EC President. He stated that there would be no enlargement of the EU until the end of his term, i.e. 2019.[1] Although Albania (June 2014) gained candidate status during this period and Serbia (January 2014) started negotiations, this should not be equated with any change in the EU's position on further enlargement. There was a lack of political will on the part of the majority of the Member States and the European institutions to prioritise these issues. The Balkan states regarded Juncker's declaration as a retreat from the EU membership promise made in 2003 (Szpala, 2018). At the same time, Germany, in order to encourage the countries of the region to sustain the continuation of the reforms and out of concern that they would not abandon them (following Juncker's declaration), presented a programme in August 2014 to support regional cooperation among the Western Balkan countries, referred to as the Berlin Process. 2016–2019 marks the evolution of the EU's position towards the Western Balkans. The issue of enlargement has become of greater interest to the EU. This state of affairs was primarily due to the following considerations: Brexit, the presidency of D. Trump, the migration crisis and the EU's adoption of the A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy (for short, the European Union Global Strategy – EUGS). Following the referendum result deciding the UK's exit from the EU, it was recognised in the Member States, especially in Germany and France, that the best response to the crisis of the European project and Brexit should be to strengthen cooperation under the banner of "more Europe", also referring to the Western Balkans. The presidency of D. Trump has also reinforced the narrative of the need for greater integration within the Union. This narrative was aimed, on the one hand, at an increasingly anti-American public opinion in Western Europe. On the other hand, it reflected uncertainty about the continued US commitment to the security of Europe, including the Balkans. In turn, the EUGS,

[1] It is significant that there was not even an Enlargement Commissioner in that European Commission, only a European Neighbourhood Policy Commissioner.

adopted by the European Council in June 2016, redefined the Union's foreign and security policy objectives and ambitions. In contrast, the migration crisis in 2015 demonstrated the region's importance for European security in the context of further migratory movements, especially uncontrolled and irregular ones. The rationale, as mentioned earlier, determined the strategy adopted by the EC towards the Western Balkans on February 6 2018, entitled A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans. It states that accessing new countries is a key task for the EU. Serbia and Montenegro were indicated as countries which should become EU members by the end of 2025 (Adamczyk, Karadzoski, 2019, pp. 103–104). The EC's position marked an evolution of the EU's approach towards the Balkans. After a decade of stagnation in this area, it was an attempt to make the process more dynamic and put it back on the EU agenda (Koźbiał, 2019). The same assessment should be made of the first EU-Western Balkans summit since 2003 in Sofia in 2018 (it was announced there that the next one would be held in two years, which also took place). At the same time, all this should not be read as a breakthrough in EU-Western Balkans relations. Rather, it attempted to break out of a 10-year impasse in relations with the region. However, this compliance did not mean that the enlargement process accelerated significantly. Nor did it mean that differences of opinion within the EU about further enlargement had disappeared. An illustration of the actual state of affairs between the EU and the Western Balkans was the position of the European Council towards the start of accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania. Despite a positive recommendation from the EC on the matter, the Council of Europe refused to launch them at its meeting in October 2019. It was decided by the disagreement between France, joined by Denmark and the Netherlands. This stance was met with criticism and great disappointment not only from the two countries directly concerned but from the other countries in the region and by supporters of further enlargement. The European Council failure to agree was seen as a "historic mistake" and pushed the Western Balkans into the sphere of influence of Russia, China and other external actors. Moreover, important for being inconsistent and undermining the credibility of the EU itself. It was pointed out that, against the backdrop of the European Council's decision, the earlier announcements and the 2018 EC document are meaningless, showing the EU's strategic void regarding the region. It was also stressed that the European Council decision could provoke a lack of understanding on the part of its partners and a loss of confidence in the EU. This is all the more so as both candidates for opening negotiations have taken several steps to

meet the expectations of the EC itself but also of the EU Member States. Following the European Council's decision to improve relations with the Balkans, EU Member States have put forward various plans for cooperation within the region, stressing the lack of possibility of a return to the situation of the last decade, i.e. stagnation. The EC presented on February 5 2020, among other proposals, a new methodology for the accession negotiations as part of the Commission communication on "Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans". This communication and the new methodology for accession negotiations should be considered on several levels. Firstly, it aimed to rebuild the Balkan partners' undermined trust in the EU. Secondly, it aimed to sustain the plan to make mutual relations more dynamic, which started in 2018 with the EC's announcement. Thirdly, it was supposed to represent a compromise between the different concepts of the Member States towards the Western Balkans and thus reduce internal disputes about the further enlargement process. At the same time, most experts are clear that new methodology for the accession negotiations, like the 2018 Communication, did not represent a breakthrough in relations with the Western Balkans (Domaradzki, 2019). At the same time, in May 2020. The European Council positively considered the proposal, previously rejected by it, to start accession negotiations with the two Balkan states. They formally started in July 2022. The example of North Macedonia and Albania is the best example of EU policy towards the Balkans after 2016. The years 2020–2022 were the period where it was possible to sustain leaders' meetings in the EU-Western Balkans format (a virtual summit in Zagreb in 2020, followed by Brdo near Kranj in 2021 and Tirana in 2022). This is also a period of increased attention by the EU to third countries involved in the region. External factors that determined the EU's policy towards the region include the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Both events have become a test of sorts for EU-Western Balkans relations. In the first case, the EU's initial response, as with other regions of the world, was rather inept. This was mainly due to internal problems within the EU itself regarding the fight against the pandemic and the lack of developed mechanisms for action in this area, including outside the EU. This situation was particularly exploited by China and Russia, among the first to offer assistance to the Balkan states. The EU, recognising the danger of Chinese and Russian COVID activity in the region, has taken numerous measures to limit the associated negative consequences for the Balkan states and the EU. As part of its financial assistance, the EU has provided the Western Balkan countries €3.3 billion to combat COVID. In their speeches, in addition to the purely humanitarian and medical aspects, the EU

representatives also emphasised the geopolitical ones. The anti-COVID action taken by the EU in the Balkans should be viewed positively. At the same time, some researchers note that, despite the propaganda and disinformation efforts by China or Russia, their effect has been limited. COVID-19 and the fight against its epidemic have demonstrated the need for the EU to strengthen its immediate neighbourhood and build resilience there (mainly against hybrid activities such as disinformation) both socially, economically and politically. Another event with implications for EU-Western Balkans relations is the war in Ukraine. Despite the historical and energetic circumstances binding the Balkans to Russia, all states in the region have condemned Russian aggression against Ukraine, as evidenced by the UNGA vote (Euractiv, 2022). However, there was no longer such unanimity on the issue of EU sanctions. Five countries in the region supported EU sanctions. The exception is Serbia, which, unlike other countries in the region, has a more multi-faceted position towards Moscow.

Over the course of 20 years, the EU's position towards the Western Balkans has been marked by a demand for further enlargement into the region. However, the EU has not been consistent in implementing this goal. Four periods of EU policy towards the Western Balkans have been identified, differing from each other. Depending on intra-EU and international circumstances (discussed above), as well as the internal situation in the Balkans (which is not the focus of this paper), these issues determined the EU's stance towards the region: from enthusiasm through fatigue to pragmatic and geopolitical cooperation.

The EU's hesitancy and lack of determination to implement the point of EU enlargement to the Balkans has not been conducive to the actual implementation of the EU's international strategy in this part of the world. It treated enlargement issues as a self-fulfilling promise, creating tension, disappointment and weariness with the whole process on both sides. Furthermore, the EU's transformative and normative power in the Balkans has not met the results expected by the West. This has exacerbated the downbeat mood in mutual relations.

Weaknesses in the EU Policy Towards the Western Balkan Countries

The dynamics of the evolution of the EU's policy towards the Western Balkans outlined above were due to both the weaknesses of the EU itself and the Balkan states. Concerning EU policy, it is essential to point out its fundamental mistakes towards the region.

a) Lack of political will, commitment and realistic prospects of membership

The EU declarations made since 2003 on EU enlargement to the Balkans were and are more like "wishful thinking" than a realistic prospect. As rightly observed, "the region is firmly on the Union's agenda but has never been a top item. Between the eurozone crisis in the early and mid-2010s, the crisis in Ukraine in 2014–2015, the refugee wave in 2015–2016, the Coronavirus pandemic, and the more recent Russian aggression in Ukraine, there is always another priority that relegates Europe's so-called inner courtyard further down on the Union's to-do list" (Bechev, 2022). This is confirmed by recent EU declarations, e.g. of Brdo of October 2021, where the phrase "enlargement" is used only once, replacing it with the unspecified and vague term "European perspective". Still, the prospect of membership seems unrealistic. One author even writes about the idea of enlargement being "clinically dead" (Mirel, 2022). There is not enough political support from the Member States for this idea. EU documents and declarations issued after 2018, as already indicated, although they were attempting to make mutual relations more dynamic, from the perspective of the membership of the Western Balkan countries, they do not contribute anything that has not been the known EU position for almost 20 years. Jan Muś puts it bluntly, believing outright that the declarations of the 2020 and 2021 EU-Western Balkans summits reflect the impasse in the enlargement policy of the EU (Muś, 2021; Scazzieri, 2021). They are expressions of empty gestures while at the same time demonstrating the powerlessness of the EU.

b) The lost credibility of the EU and the division between "Us" and "Them"

EU credibility in the region is at a deficient level. This state of affairs is the result of flawed EU decisions. Firstly, because of the absence, as indicated in point A, of a clear and transparent answer from the EU regarding a realistic date for the accession of the Western Balkan countries to the EU. Secondly, mention should be made of the EU's peculiar ignorance towards the Balkan states. In other words, the EU's existing incentives or proposals are unreliable or insufficient. The situation with renaming one of the Balkan states can serve as an example. In addition to numerous reforms, Skopje signed an agreement with Athens in 2018 after many years of disputes with Greece. Under it, the state's name was changed – from Macedonia to North Macedonia (Adamczyk, Karadzoski, 2019, pp. 108–109). The citizens voted in favour of this agreement in a referendum, although they did so only because of their pro-European aspirations – and it was this factor that determined the outcome of the

referendum (since the majority was, in fact, against changing the name of the state, it was only done because of a desire to speed up the road to NATO and the EU). Ignorance is also mentioned by the Albanian Prime Minister and other Western Balkan leaders, pointing out that, although perhaps rather slowly, they are nevertheless reforming their countries, which does not translate in any way into the process of their negotiations with the EU. Thus, "today, the prospect of EU integration, which held such power just a few years ago, is losing its credibility for the political elites and societies in the Western Balkans" (Knaus, 2021). At the same time, "the EU's perception and treatment of the Western Balkans reflects a polarising dichotomy between "us" and "them", which is at odds with the avowed intention to build a common European future" (Stratulat, 2021). The exclusion of the Western Balkans from the Conference on the Future of the European serves as an example.

c) Status quo, or pretending to hold negotiation

The existing *status quo* relating to the enlargement process seems to satisfy both sides, i.e. the EU and the Balkan states. We are dealing with a kind of a "vicious circle" where some EU Member States, the EC, and countries aspiring to join the EU are satisfied with the status quo. The status quo, imperfect though it is, appears to be tolerable for each side. EU member states, sceptical about further EU enlargement, "can maintain the fiction that they favour a united continent and that they are still sincerely in favour of eventual European expansion, while their actions preclude actual enlargement from taking place. Simultaneously, oligarchs in the Balkans can justify their current domestic policies, arguing that only they have the needs and aspirations of their citizens at heart" (Fraenkel, 2016). Some analysts point out that the war in Ukraine and the resulting concerns about its negative consequences for the Balkans (including a further process of disinformation, the spread of fake news and the stirring up of ethnoreligious conflicts) may contribute to the acceleration of the accession of the countries of the region to the EU. Such an opinion is premature and too optimistic (Bechev, 2022). Given both internal and external circumstances, the *status quo* policy/strategy will continue to be in force for the Balkan region. There is neither the political will to change this nor a realistic prospect of EU membership for the Balkan states (as I wrote in point a).

d) The overly formal and technical approach of the EC

The EC's approach to the negotiations and the enlargement process towards the Balkan countries is characterised by excessive formalism and

a focus on technical and administrative issues. As Jan Muś put it "the current policy of the European Union towards the Western Balkans is not oriented towards a constructive approach to the issue of European integration and solving specific problems (the rule of law, the judiciary, corruption, bilateral disputes, media freedom, democratic institutions)" (Muś, 2021). Often Balkan countries are rewarded "for meeting specific technical accession criteria, while at the same time they can be penalised for their failure to meet some substantive goal whose importance vis-à-vis technical criteria has not been made explicit" (Fraenkel, 2016). Furthermore, the EC tends to reduce political issues to mere technical-formal matters. As put "the Commission has mastered the art of turning political issues into technical benchmarks, and so far, this has worked to keep the process rolling" (Stratulat, 2021). However, such EC tactics have their limitations. Especially "when it comes to democracy- and nation-building or reconciliation in war-torn, multi-ethnic societies, statehood and bilateral disputes, and even the creation of functioning market economies" (Stratulat, 2021). This state of affairs is highlighted by, among others, the ECA report. It highlights the EC's limited role in reforming the rule of law system in the Balkans. The resolution of these issues will largely condition the further enlargement process.

e) Money is not everything

EU accession "has been an elite-driven process in Balkan countries" (Bechev, 2022). Thus, leaders from the region pursued reforms in line with Brussels' demands with the hope and conviction that they would be rewarded (financially) for this by the EU and their voters (at the ballot box). This principle, however, no longer works. The incentives from the EU are insufficient, and the promises made by the EU to the Balkan states lack credibility, as mentioned in point b. "The ultimate reward, EU membership, is not within reach even if these reforms were to make headway". All of this means that "the extra financial assistance someone might receive for being a good pupil is not a sufficient reason for a government to embark on costly reforms, such as ensuring the judiciary is free of political interference, or the media can investigate someone's business partners" (Bechev, 2022). As a result, those in power in the Balkans are limiting themselves to carrying out the kind of reforms required by the EU without weakening their position in the country.

f) EU crises and reforms within the EU, above all

The European Union has been in permanent crisis for almost two decades. From the constitutional crisis, the eurozone, the migration crisis,

Brexit and the pandemic crisis to the Ukraine war crisis. To this should be pointed out the identity crisis of the leadership in the EU, the lack of faith in European integration, and the axiological (values) crisis. We are dealing with the occurrence of successive crises. These repercussions proved to be much broader, more intense and more profound than expected. They have revealed significant phenomena of a systemic nature that affect the EU as a whole and testify to its structural weaknesses. The crises of the EU and in the EU are not over, and we will see their consequences for many years to come. It is a period full of uncertainty regarding the direction of evolution in Europe. At the same time as changes within the EU, there are changes concerning the structure of international relations and the place of the EU within them. All of this makes intra-EU reform an essential issue for some EU Member States. The European Union, according to, for example, President Macron, should first seek to address the adverse effects of the previous crises. Only a more robust and reformed EU should move forward with further enlargement. The rise of populist, anti-immigration and protectionist movements in Europe reinforces this position. They are no longer only expressed by nationalist political forces such as the French National Rally.

Anti-EU views are also officially preached by leading politicians in power, such as Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán. We can speak of a crisis of the foundation of European integration, i.e. a lack of public conviction in the validity of further integration. "Such a situation changes the optics of looking at external relations. Priority is given to economic and financial cooperation and protecting the interests of the national economies rather than building political influence and European identity" (Osica, 2010, p. 86). In such a Europe, there is no room for global ambitions, including those for the immediate neighbourhood, i.e. the Balkans. In addition, the crisis in the EU came at a time of weak leaders with no clear visions. This lack of leadership and faith in Europe significantly determines the shape of the EU's Foreign and Security Policy.

g) Triple fatigue. Towards rejectionism

After the economic crisis, enthusiasm for further EU enlargement to the Balkan states began to wane. This phenomenon is called enlargement fatigue in the literature (Adamczyk, 2016). It stemmed from the EU's internal challenges identified in point f, as well as disillusionment with the effects of past assistance, ongoing programmes and cooperation with Romania and Bulgaria, which were admitted to the EU in 2007. The idea of enlargement to accelerate development in the Balkan countries and as the EU's main objective in the region was increasingly questioned. According

to the Eurobarometer, in 2013, upwards of 60% of Europeans opposed any further expansion of the EU due to their concern about the Union's ability to absorb new countries, whether politically or culturally. On top of this enlargement fatigue, there is also an institutional and financial one. The former was linked to the continuous institutional reforms in the EU since the late 1990s, and of which the Constitutional Treaty – rejected in a referendum in 2005 by the citizens of France and the Netherlands – was to be the quintessential example. In the end, the Lisbon Treaty was adopted, representing a compromise, including on institutional matters. The subsequent significant enlargement in the EU could involve a renewed discussion of institutional change in the EU.

Moreover, nobody in the EU wants that. In turn, "financial fatigue" is linked to the financial crisis of 2008. In this context, the challenge before "representatives of the EU is to justify to their parliaments and constituencies why the union should admit another poor and unqualified Balkan state when this membership will unavoidably result in even greater financial burdens for average citizens of current EU countries" (Fraenkel, 2016). These three "fatigues" were further highlighted during the migration and the pandemic crises. At the same time, one researcher notes that we are rejecting the idea of enlargement in EU policy towards the Western Balkans rather than "fatigue". "If the enlargement is an integral instrument of European foreign policy, fatigue should only reflect a temporary respite from an ongoing and predictable process to which all member states are committed. Given the stated policy of delaying further EU expansion, the Union would appear to be experiencing more deeply rooted "rejectionism". Rather than a temporary digression from its intention to expand, the EU's promise and denial or postponement of accession have become a stick more than a carrot in its relationship with the Western Balkan countries" (Fraenkel, 2016).

h) Member States above all and "the whims of domestic politics"

Member States play a crucial role in the EU's enlargement to the Balkans. Their role in this respect is steadily increasing at the expense of the EC's position. An exemplification of this is when France, Denmark, the Netherlands and then Bulgaria vetoed accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia despite a positive recommendation from the EC. There is, therefore, a gap between the EC's position and the decisions of the Member States. This shows the structural weakness of the EU, as well as the power of a single state within the EU to block the entire negotiation process. The Commission Communication of February 5 2020, also primarily reflected the positions of the Member States and their position.

Moreover, as some analysts note, it is telling that a large part of the communication is devoted not to the Balkan countries but to the Member States. Such a move intended to induce the Member States to vote positively (again) to start negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. Also introduced by the 2020 Communication new methodology for the accession negotiations on enlargement and its provisions strengthen the Member States throughout the process while weakening the EC. It also essentially bypasses the previous experience of the Balkan states. Thus, we are dealing with the so-called "politicisation" by the EU Member States of the enlargement process. Enlargement issues must also be considered in the context of the internal policies of individual Member States. As one analyst put it, "Member States do not hesitate to make use of the enlargement process for their domestic objectives (for instance, in the disputes between Athens and Skopje, Ljubljana and Zagreb, the Hague and Belgrade, Nicosia and Ankara, etc.)". He adds aptly: "The outcome has been a 'creeping nationalisation' of the enlargement policy, which discredits the EU's commitments to aspirant States and undermines the transformative power of the enlargement process" (Reljic, 2011). It seems that the phenomenon mentioned above will increase. Indeed, although those major disputes allowing the enlargement process to continue (e.g. the agreement between Athens and Skopje) have been resolved, this does not mean that they have been entirely resolved.

"Several EU states have bilateral issues with Western Balkans countries that they could raise during the accession process: Greece over North Macedonia and the status of the Greek minority in Albania; Bulgaria over North Macedonia's heritage; and Croatia with Bosnia over the status of the Croatian minority there and its borders with Bosnia, Montenegro and Serbia" (Scazzieri, 2021). Populist political parties, both in the EU and in the Western Balkans, in the course of, for example, a referendum campaign, certainly use these themes for political gain (advantage). All this means that the EU's commitment to enlargement, "which often bend to the whims of domestic politics in its member states, are unlikely to help deliver convergence" (Stratulat, 2021). To this must also be added the disagreements within member states regarding the further enlargement process. They are most evident between France and Germany and France and the member states grouped in the informal club of supporters of the Western Balkans in the EU (Poland together with nine countries).

Regarding the former, the best illustration of the essence of this dispute is the position of both countries towards the 2018 Commission Strategy. France, unlike Germany, felt that the provisions in the document regarding

the accession date of Serbia and Montenegro were too optimistic and premature. Regarding the second, the position in the context of the veto blocking the start of negotiation talks with North Macedonia and Albania issued by some Member States (supporters of the Western Balkans in the EU) in November 2019.

i) Negotiating differently than ever before – towards a lose/lose scenario

The EU's strategy towards the Balkans was mainly based on conditionality. In discussions with Western Balkan partners, attention is paid primarily to procedures. All this and the previous role and importance of the member states in the enlargement process imply the current state of affairs in EU-Western Balkans relations. One analyst notes that "evidently, the EU is applying stricter conditionality in the negotiations with the Western Balkan aspirants than in any previous enlargement round" (Reljic, 2011). The model of the Eastern enlargement negotiations cannot be replicated in the Balkans. There is a fundamental difference in the approach of the EC and the Member States to the negotiations associated with the 2004 Big Bang and those with the Western Balkans. The focus then was on the benefits of the process. In these current ones, this is no longer so obvious. The EU's behaviour is determined above all by pragmatism and the EU's internal problems, and the rapidly changing international order (Fraenkel, 2016). Thus, what should have been the final outcome of the negotiations, i.e. a win/win situation for the EU and the Balkans, has been transformed into a win/lose or possibly a lose/lose scenario (Doorley, 2021).

j) Money is not the most crucial thing but without it...

As indicated in point E, money does not solve all the problems related to the implementation of EU policy towards the Western Balkans. However, their limited sum also negatively affects the recent results of EU action in the region. It is also a kind of proof of how much the EU is interested in a region. Under the MFF, funding for the IPA instrument has decreased compared to the previous MFF. Per capita, this amounts to just €500. In addition, the Member States received a considerable amount of aid under the Recovery and Resilience Facility. The Balkans were not included in this mechanism. Some observers believe this is "putting up a new wall" between the EU and the Balkans (Reljić, 2021). The only thing the EU pledged at the Brdo summit was €9 billion in the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans.

Weaknesses in the EU Policy Towards the Western Balkans and the Consequences for the Region

The EU's protracted negotiations with the Western Balkans negatively impact the EU's position in the region. At the same time, the mistakes mentioned earlier and weaknesses committed by the EU intensify anti-democratic tendencies in the region, nationalist tendencies, and ethnic tensions and undermine the reform process in the Balkans socially, politically and economically. The growing scepticism, even among Euro-enthusiasts, is exacerbated by internal challenges and conflicts. When looking for people to blame for their mistakes, the political elites in the Balkans often use simplifications, pointing to the EU as the main responsible party for this and not the other state of affairs.

a) EU integration and the living standard

The process of integrating the Western Balkans into the EU, which has lasted more than 20 years, has not resulted in a significant improvement in living standards for the people of the region. At the same time, internal conditions, including the problem of corruption, nepotism, and inefficient administration, have not been resolved. We are facing socioeconomic stagnation. In turn, the subsequent economic, pandemic, and energy crises in Europe and the world and their consequences – have exacerbated such a state of affairs in the region. All this negatively affects the perception of the EU in the region and undermines "the credibility of Western Balkan politicians' promises of a better future life in the EU" (Reljic, 2011). For most of the Balkan population, the integration process into Europe does not mean the same improvement in their living situation. This, in turn, causes the region's people to lack the determination for change and systemic reform indicated by the EU. The principle of "if the public authorities deliver improvements in living standards and the quality of governance, the population will support policies that concentrate on reform, democracy and the rule of law" does not work here (Reljic, 2011).

b) Membership as a "moving target", a repeat of Turkey's accession

Even for the most pro-Europeans in the Western Balkans, membership is beginning to seem unrealistic, "becoming something of a "moving target". On the one hand, some Member States, reluctant to further enlargement, stand in the way. On the other hand, the numerous unresolved internal problems in the region prevent the development of cooperation with the EU. All this leads to weakening efforts for further reforms in the Western

Balkan countries and a reversal of those already introduced. Citizens of the region are increasingly disillusioned with the EU and sceptical about the realistic prospect of membership (Scazzieri, 2021). Some analysts compare this situation with that of Turkey in this respect (Dabrowski, Myachenkova, 2018).

c) The geopolitical vacuum

The lack of a real prospect of EU membership for the Western Balkans and greater EU involvement in the region creates a geopolitical vacuum. It is increasingly being used by other countries, especially China and Russia. China is doing this, especially in the context of its Belt and Road Initiative project. Russia is driven by geopolitical objectives, seeking to prevent the Balkan states from becoming part of the Euro-Atlantic structures, i.e. NATO and the EU. The pandemic and the war in Ukraine have further highlighted the interests of both countries in the region. The pandemic and the associated aid from China and Russia to the Western Balkans were used by them to strengthen their positions in the region while portraying the West and its pandemic-related activities as ineffective and unjust. The Chinese and Russian "mask and vaccine diplomacy" is part of the superpowers' competition for influence in the Balkans. More broadly, it stands for the "global battle of narratives" for leadership in the non-Western, i.e. non-EU, world. The first months of the pandemic saw activity from Beijing and Russia regarding medical, mask and financial assistance, followed by the provision of vaccines. At the same time, it is a time of numerous fake news stories put out by both countries. Over time, EU assistance, as mentioned, has been more generous (a lot) and systemic – aiming for a comprehensive solution to the pandemic. In addition, the vaccines offered by the EU have proved more effective than those from Russia and China in fighting and reducing the virus. However, it should be pointed out that the Balkan region has one of the smallest numbers of vaccinated inhabitants (due to their scepticism about the vaccines and the virus itself rather than anti-vaccine propaganda largely co-financed by Moscow). The war in Ukraine, on the one hand, has shown the geopolitical importance of the region in Europe on the other hand and the region's energy dependence on supplies from Russia on the other. The test of the credibility and partnership between the EU and the Western Balkans was, in the context of the war in Ukraine, the attitude of the subsequent region's governments to the war and the EU sanctions imposed on Moscow. Countries in the region condemned Russia and, at the same time, argued for sanctions. However, their position, particularly that of Serbia, was more cautious on this issue than the EU. It is worth

noting that Serbia and Russia share a long tradition of cooperation along the lines of building a Slavic community, anti-Westernism and a somewhat reserved stance towards EU integration. President Vučić did not publicly use the term aggressor in relation to Russia after Russia invaded Ukraine. At the same time, it has consistently pursued a multi-vector foreign policy that does not exclude maintaining good relations with Russia as with the EU. The latter is still the most significant trading partner for Serbia.

Concerning sanctions, one could observe Serbia's exceptionality on this issue. It did not completely close the airspace to Russian aircraft. Thus, allowing transit flights through Belgrade to some extent enabled Russia to circumvent EU sanctions. At the same time, the evolution of the Serbian President's position is significant. Recognising Russia's troubles in Ukraine (especially after the recapture and liberation of Kherson by Ukrainian troops), he has increasingly supported his country's pro-European aspirations, moving away from his traditional policy of balancing the two partners, i.e. the EU and Russia.

d) The Balkan paradox

Nationalist tendencies and the weakening of pro-democratic and pro-European forces is a constant trend in the Balkans. The political elites are taking advantage of the impatience and scepticism prevailing among the public about the further accession process to achieve their goals. These do not necessarily coincide with rapid integration into EU structures, as noted: "Leaders whose power depends on being able to give out political favours and government contracts have few incentives to reform. Cracking down on corruption and increasing transparency in areas such as public procurement would probably mean losing power, and possibly also facing prosecution for past misdeeds" (Scazzieri, 2021).

Moreover, by treating these leaders as partners and providing them with funding linked to the accession process, the EU is helping them to consolidate their influence.

Moreover, EU leaders and institutions are often reluctant to criticise leaders such as Vučić of Serbia for undermining democratic mechanisms, fearing that this would damage bilateral relations. Therefore, EU leaders and the EU legitimise authoritarian/non-democratic action in the Balkans to some extent. We have a kind of Balkan paradox in that the EU is indirectly contributing to the erosion of the rule of law in the Western Balkans (more on this in the next section). Lack of a clear and explicit EU strategy in this area. Such a situation, on the one hand, weakens the EU's position as a normative power and thus exposes its weaknesses; on the other hand, it plunges the region into stagnation (Scazzieri, 2021).

e) Towards nationalism

The lack of a realistic prospect of EU membership has encouraged many politicians in the region to turn to nationalist rhetoric, fuelling tensions between and within states. With the lack of progress in negotiations, ethnic conflicts, border and historical disputes are growing and re-emerging. The prospect of accession "steered countries away from nationalism, helped to bring about, among other things, the Prespa Agreement between Macedonia and Greece and fostered dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo. Now that accession has stalled, these achievements are at risk" (Scazzieri, 2021). As stated, "nationalists and conservatives often present such junior partnerships of their countries as a better alternative for the future than to remain in the eternal waiting loop outside the EU" (Reljic, 2011).

The Balkan Stabilitocracy, or the Loss of the EU's Transformative Power

In the international arena, the European Union is an actor to which the concept of so-called non-military (civilian power) and normative power successfully applies. Together, these two concepts fall under the broader and more encompassing category of "soft power", one of the EU's main strategies in the international sphere.

This idea determines the actions of Western countries (EU) concerning third countries. Adopting the concept of the EU as a political entity operating on a normative basis and promoting the political and economic values of liberalism constitute the leading platform for EU activity on the international stage, including in the context of enlargement policy. In this regard, the theory of liberalism (and its particular strands) and constructivism should be taken into account in explaining such EU actions in international relations (using the example of actions towards the Western Balkans) as democracy promotion, humanitarian interventions, support for political and economic transformation, reconstruction of states. Furthermore, constructivism allows for a better understanding of processes and phenomena such as the Europeanisation of third countries. Taking the example of EU-Balkan relations, it should be stated that the actions undertaken by the European Union contain to some extent an element of Europeanisation of the third party, i.e. transferring to their soil values, patterns and patterns of action, models of governance, best practices and experiences that were hitherto unknown to the recipients.

The EU's soft power, therefore, influences the international environment using mainly economic, financial and political means rather than military power – which is due to the lack of an autonomous

military capability, i.e. one that would be at its sole disposal. The main characteristics of a non-military power include, among other things, eschewing the use of military pressure in favour of peaceful means, the primacy of political and diplomatic action in solving global problems, and the use of international organisation mechanisms and structures to do so (Zajączkowski, 2019; Milczarek, 2003).

In the context of enlargement, new theoretical approaches conceptually linked to theories treating the EU as a soft power are also emerging. One of these is the EU's "transformative power" concept. Developed by Mark Leonard in 2005, the concept first explored the impact the EU had on post-communist countries from Central Europe aspiring for EU membership and now on other candidates from the Balkan area. According to M. Leonard, thanks to the EU's comprehensive support, the countries of Central Europe have achieved a political transformation characterised by the successful implementation of European values. According to the researcher, a similar transformation would occur in the Balkans. Acting in the long term, this force is expected to lead, by way of a domino effect, to far-reaching changes in the EU's neighbouring countries, in this case, the Balkans. The concept of transformative power focuses on influences on the domestic situation prevailing in these countries, leading to profound changes in the spheres of politics, institutions, law, administration, and economy (Barburska, 2018, pp. 159–160).

The EU's policy towards the Western Balkans has thus become a kind of test for the EU as a "transformative power" and, more broadly, as a "soft power". "In order to remake the Western Balkans "in its own image", the Union is exercising its normative power to a greater extent than it ever has before when dealing with transition countries" (Reljic, 2011). All this is expected to lead to the transformation of the Western Balkans into a region of peace, stability, prosperity and socioeconomic development, with EU membership as the ultimate goal (Lika, 2021).

The EU's strategy towards the region is to Europeanise and transfer the *acquis communautaire* (EU acquis) to the Western Balkan countries. Among other things, this requires them to meet the Copenhagen criteria (political, economic and acquis communautaire) (Lika, 2021).

Dimitar Bechev notes that "beyond the carrot-and-stick strategies proceeding from the application of membership conditionality, the EU has wielded considerable ideational power as a promoter of certain normative notions of appropriate state behaviour" (Lika, 2021).

However, the results so far of EU policy, including the transformation strategy, towards the Balkans are limited. Similar results to those achieved for Central European countries have not been achieved.

It is pointed out that the EU, with its misguided policies and strategies (as written above), unintentionally contributes to the formation of so-called "stabilitocracies" in the region. Such countries have significant democratic deficits (Clingendael Report, 2022, p. 9),[2] although their governments claim to be working towards democratic reforms and stability. The EU supports such governments, as mentioned in 4(d), as the security issue is a priority for Brussels. Furthermore, as noted, „EU strategies and policies have been quite effective in fostering the formal adoption of EU laws and reforming institutions on paper. However, they have not managed to bring about decisive democratic changeable to alter domestic dynamics of clientelism and corruption in the WB6" (Clingendael Report, 2022, p. 17). COVID further helped to perpetuate such a situation, as individual governments in the Balkans strengthened their executive power at the expense of the legislative and judicial.

Factors favouring the emergence of stabilitocracies include the insufficient application of EU conditionality and the legitimisation of the current governments in the Balkans, which do not adhere to democratic rules, by the EU and its cooperation with them. Thus, the transformative power of the EU is limited. One report quite extensively identifies eight flaws in the enlargement policy. These factors have not only contributed to the ineffectiveness of EU policies and strategies but have also actively contributed – to varying degrees – to the emergence of stabilitocracies in the Balkans. These are: "1. The EU's overly technical approach to enlargement fails to foster deep political and societal transformation. 2. A lack of clarity in the rule of law definitions hinders the adequate transposal of EU values. 3. Inadequate reporting on reform progress dilutes actual political realities in the WB6. 4. The EU often fails to speak out against and act upon standstill or backlash, implicitly offering tacit support to autocratic tendencies instead. 5. The EU regularly proves unable to reward progress because it is unable to find common understanding among its member states, thereby harming its credibility. 6. An overly leader-oriented approach towards the WB6 reinforces and legitimises the position of Western Balkan political elites who use the EU's public endorsement to reinforce their grip on society. 7. Party political relations between political families in the EU and their WB6 counterparts lead to

[2] "These countries suffer from 'elements of state capture, including links with organised crime and corruption at all levels of government and administration, as well as a strong entanglement of public and private interests'. This means that political corruption and clientelist networks are widespread and permeate the decision-making processes. Consequently, democratic institutions in the Western Balkans are fragile".

undue support for WB6 parties even when they display non-democratic behaviour. 8. A lack of interim timelines leaves the EU unable to monitor reform progress and hold governments of the region accountable for not carrying out necessary democratic reforms" (Clingendael Report, 2022, pp. 1, 10).

At the same time, another researcher T. Börzel points out that in addition to the EU's mistakes, internal conditions also play a significant role in the reform of the Balkan states, including politically. Indeed, she notes, "that problems of limited statehood have seriously curbed the EU's transformative power in the Western Balkans. (...) On the one hand, the EU has offered the Western Balkans a membership perspective to stabilise the region and overcome problems caused by weak and contested statehood. On the other hand, the limited statehood of Western Balkan countries undermines their compliance with EU norms and rules" (Börzel, 2011, p. 3).

Conclusions

a) The hypothesis posed in the introduction based on the assumption that the EU's existing strategy towards the Western Balkans is not aligned with the expected goals and objectives should be positively verified. The EU's policy towards the Western Balkans over the past 20 years has shown little credibility or effectiveness. The EU's transformative and normative objectives for the region have been minimally achieved. There has been a depreciation of enlargement as an instrument of EU influence in the Western Balkan countries. Enlargement has become a common slogan that is used in the rhetoric of the EU and the Balkan states, but both sides use it without much enthusiasm or commitment.
b) One has to fully agree with T. Börzel, who believes that: „the inconsistent use of membership conditionality does not only mitigate the transformative power of the EU in the Western Balkans; it damages its international credibility as a "normative power" creating a new 'capacity-expectation gap'" (Börzel, 2011, p. 15).
c) The EU's "non-enlargement" policy towards the Balkans is creating impatience and growing Euroscepticism among the region's citizens while at the same time weakening and calling into question the EU's credibility.
d) The process of Europeanisation and the mechanisms of EU democracy support in the Western Balkans contribute directly and indirectly to undemocratic tendencies in the region and the formation of so-called

"stabilitocracies". The weaknesses and deficiencies in EU policy towards the region identified in the text reinforce these tendencies.

e) The EU and the Balkan political elite (those in power) are content with the *status quo* in mutual relations. There is not enough political will among the EU to admit the Balkan states to the EU, thus speeding up the negotiation process. Governments in the Balkans, on the other hand, are only minimally transforming their states. This situation can be digested by saying that the EU pretends to expand, and the Western Balkan states pretend to reform and Europeanise.

f) The Western Balkans are becoming a site of rivalry between individual powers and states. This was highlighted above all by the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. In addition to perpetuating the negative phenomena in the region, the weaknesses and deficiencies in the EU's strategy towards the Balkans also affect its position towards other powers in the Balkans. The lack of a real prospect of membership and the emerging geopolitical vacuum in the region is being exploited by China and Russia. Europeans need a more assertive policy in the Western Balkans to counter Russian and Chinese influence.

g) The enlargement process requires the EU to revise the instruments it has used so far, especially in the context of democratic backsliding in future member-states. At the same time, the enlargement process should continue to be a central demand and objective of the EU. Interim solutions in this respect do not solve the problem. On the contrary, "Doing so would only reduce their influence, further sap momentum for reform and consolidate the drift towards authoritarian politics in the Western Balkans" (Scazzieri, 2021).

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Relations with the Balkans as a Part of Poland's Foreign Policy

Abstract
The chapter aims to study the position and significance of Poland's relations with the Balkan region within the entire foreign policy of Poland, especially in the modern post-1989 times. To analyse the issue, it seemed necessary to highlight a broader historical and geopolitical background that determined the importance of all the major directions of the policy; that of the western, eastern, northern, and southern. For valid reasons, the first two of these directions have always been prioritised. The other two, including the southern direction covering the Balkans, however, has never been a priority for Poland, which is the main research thesis of this chapter. Attempting to answer the research question regarding the main reasons for this state of affairs, the fundamental factors affecting it have been analysed and the main stages of the evolution of Polish-Balkan relations have been presented. While characterising these relations, the basic weaknesses and shortcomings of Poland's foreign policy towards the Balkans have been emphasised, as have recommendations regarding the potential for improving the course of this policy.

Keywords: Poland, Balkans, Western Balkans, Foreign Policy, European Union, NATO, Russia

Introduction

When analysing Poland's relations with the Balkans, it is necessary first and foremost to place this issue in a broader context. The position and importance of relations with this region stem from the evolution of the overall foreign policy of Poland. Nevertheless, the condition of Polish/Balkan relations (as with any other region) depends on a variety of subjective and objective factors that constitute a set of specific historical and geopolitical conditions. They have determined all directions of Polish foreign policy, attaching priority to one of them, and considering the others to be of relatively lesser importance. Hence, there is a need to briefly characterise these directions, which will allow us to outline a broader background that will enable a balanced assessment of the real significance of Polish/Balkan relations.

Adopting this type of research approach requires the use of adequate analysis instruments. The main research thesis of this chapter is the conclusion that relations with the Balkan region are not among the priorities of Poland's foreign policy, although, of course, they are not of marginal importance either. When attempting to answer the main research question as regards the primary reasons behind such states of affairs, one should apply the relevant research methods. These include, above all, the problematic-chronological method used in conjunction with other methods such as historical, comparative, institutional and legal, and finally, to a certain extent, prognostic. The application of these methods requires, and at the same time gives grounds for, the use of the necessary descriptive narrative in a substantial number of article passages.

The Geopolitical and Historical Factors Shaping the Foreign Policy of Poland

The foreign policy of each sovereign state depends to a great extent on its geographical location as well as on specific historical conditions, covering various factors such as that of the political, economic, military, ideological, social, and cultural (just to name the most important ones). In term of geographic location, concurring fully with the rather orthodox interpretation of geopolitics presented by the creator of this concept, Haldorf Mackinder, may not be the best idea, but there is no doubt that it is a determinant of great importance.

This applies particularly to Poland. Geographically, it is centrally located in Europe, while being one of the largest and most important countries in Central Europe. It lies at the intersection of two important axes of the entire continent; the East-West axis connecting Western

Europe with Russia and the North-South axis running from Scandinavia to the Balkans. In addition, the majority of the territory of Poland lies in the latitudinal belt of the great Central and Eastern European plains, where it is relatively easy to move around without encountering any major geographical obstacles in the form of large rivers or mountain ranges. All this makes this situation very favourable in times of peace, but at the same time extremely dangerous in times of conflict and war.

Hence, a mere glance at the map of Europe explains a lot when it comes to the priorities of the foreign policy of contemporary Poland. According to the foregoing geographical factors, this policy has four main directions to choose from, which, figuratively speaking, coincide with the nautical so-called "wind rose". These are the following directions: west, north, east, and south. Some of them have been given priority, but to better understand the main factors that underpinned this, a brief historical overview is required.

The West and the East as Priority Directions of the Foreign Policy of Poland

At the outset, it should be highlighted that Poland, with over a thousand-year history of statehood, has changed its territorial range over the centuries, and thus the most important geopolitical factors influencing its foreign policy have changed. The medieval Polish state occupied a large part of today's Poland, but with notable exceptions. This applied, *inter alia*, to Silesia – located in the southwest (over which Polish rulers lost control relatively quickly) and, in particular, Prussia in the northeast, which became the domain of Germanic power, most visible in the form of the expansion of the Teutonic Order. It was the centuries-old and bloody struggle with the Teutonic Knights that for Poles became a symbol of the fight against the German "push to the east" ("Drang nach Osten"). In fact, however, only in the 18th century did Prussia, which turned into one of the most important and militant German states, become a huge threat to the Polish state. At the end of that century, Prussia contributed to the partitions of Poland and its disappearance from the map of Europe for the entirety of the nineteenth century. A continuation of this threat was, among other things, the policy of Hitler's Third Reich, with well-known consequences during World War II.

Generally speaking, however, Polish/German relations were much more peaceful for a number of centuries. They were characterised by a strong permeation of cultural patterns and civilization and economic standards, as well as political cooperation. To put one in the spotlight, it is sufficient to indicate that the first medieval Polish rulers were loyal allies

and even vassals of German emperors, and in the 18th century the kings of Saxony were enthroned in Warsaw. In general, in the civilisation and cultural spheres, mutual relations were very much revived and fruitful. At the same time, Germany was something of a bridge with Western Europe. This enabled the establishing of close relations with Western Europe and made Poland a country that was perceived as a "bulwark" of Western civilisation and Latin Christianity. All this meant that the western direction became one of the two fundamental reasons for the Polish *raison d'état*, and this situation – as we will see in further considerations – has continued to the present day.

The East became the second main direction. Initially, it was related to the territorial expansion of Poland in this direction, which had already begun in the Middle Ages. Its apogee took place after the Union of Lublin concluded in 1569 uniting the Kingdom of Poland with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The newly-established Polish/Lithuanian Commonwealth was one of the largest and most powerful countries in Europe at that time. It encompassed, apart from Polish lands, a sizeable area of today's Russia, all of Belarus, and the majority of present-day Ukrainian territory. The new state of Poland was characterised by ineffectual royal power and, at the same time, massive noble-class dominance, which subordinated the expansion to the East to the vital interests of the entire state. However, these interests were not adequately secured. In particular, it was neither possible to fully use the potential inherent in the attractiveness of Polish culture (Poland's "soft power" at that time), nor to convince the slowly-emerging Ukrainian nation to become part of a mutually-beneficial cooperation within a common state.

As a result, the opportunity to create the "Republic of Three Nations", including Poles, Lithuanians, and Ruthenians, was not seized. The establishment of a state like that could have changed the course of history not only of Poland, but probably also of Central and Eastern Europe. The failure of this project greatly contributed to the development of the power of the Russian tsarist state, which quickly annexed most of Ukraine, spreading its nationalist slogans with tragic consequences to this very day. As a result, the eastern direction became crucial for Poland, because from there came the main threat not only to its interests but also to its existence. It was mainly Russia, along with Prussia and Austria, that led to the fall of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth by carrying out said partitions. Also, in later periods, and already in the 20th century, Russia threatened Polish statehood. Firstly, it attacked a newly reborn Poland in 1920, suffering a historically significant defeat during the Battle of Warsaw (considered one of the 20 most important battles in the history of the

world). Then, the Soviet Union, together with the Third Reich, attacked Poland in September 1939 and committed numerous crimes against Poles (let alone dominating Poland under the communist system in the years 1945–1989). Current, post-1989 threats should also be added, which are nowadays exacerbated by the Russian aggression against Ukraine. The highlighted painful experiences obviously make the eastern direction a priority for the Polish *raison d'état*, especially in the context of ensuring security.

The specific location of Poland on the European East-West axis has clearly been not only a fundamental determinant of the Polish state's foreign policy, but also a fate-decisive factor for Poles, which was additionally determined by the aforementioned shifting of the territories of Poland. The revived-in-1918-pre-war Polish state did not encompass the majority of the former pre-partition territories in the East. As a result of World War II, there was an even more pronounced shift to the west - the new, eastern border of Poland became the Curzon Line running roughly along the Bug River (which deprived Poles of the so-called Eastern Borderlands with cities such as Lviv), and, in return, the Polish state incorporated German lands, such as East Prussia, Pomerania, the areas by the Oder as well as Silesia (together with the second largest city of the Reich, which was Wrocław). Therefore, its geographical location allowed Poland (which at the same time acquired ethnic homogeneity unprecedented in Europe) to occupy a key geopolitical position in Central Europe.

At the same time, however, it did not change the principal fact that the country's geographical location has always placed Poland between two neighbouring powers. On the one hand, there is Germany, which personifies the broadly understood world of Western civilisation, and, on the other hand, there's Russia, which represents a fundamentally different civilisation circle. Throughout history, relations between Poles and these two neighbours were complicated, but, contrary to popular belief, they were not solely hostile. As already mentioned, in the case of Germany, Poles, apart from fighting a Germanic "push to the East", benefitted to a large extent from the civilisational achievements of their western neighbour. As regards Russia, rightly considered the greatest oppressor of Polish identity, we experienced favourable positions and closer relations of all kinds - for example, it is a fact that, in the 17th century, it was possible to establish a Polish prince on the Moscow throne, and important Polish political forces which formed in the nineteenth century such as the National Democracy, openly supported the pro-Russian option.

There is no doubt, however, that in terms of relations with both of these neighbours, social views and the state's foreign policy crystallised

in contemporary Poland. Poles, after regaining full sovereignty in 1989, strongly supported the idea of rapprochement or, rather, returning to the family of Western countries. It had to be associated with establishing close ties with Germany. It occurred despite extremely difficult historical experiences, especially the memory of the tragic consequences of the German occupation during World War II. This also happened despite some geopolitical concerns arising from the reunification of Germany in 1990, which quite suddenly became the most powerful country in all of Europe. In Warsaw, however, the rational perspective prevailed that it was the means to approximate the structures of Western European and Euro-Atlantic integration, such as the European Communities and NATO.

It was all the more urgent and justified as Poland was then a weakened state that, after the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, was not a member of any international system of security guarantees and which struggled economically and socially to a great extent. It comes as no surprise, then, that the priorities in Polish foreign policy in the early 1990s were to strengthen relations with the democratic states of the West and their organisational structures, as well as to establish and stabilise contact with its immediate neighbourhood (Orzelska, 2011). The subsequent decade Poles dedicated to difficult and arduous preparations for membership in NATO and the European Union. These efforts ultimately came to a successful end; Poland became a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation in 1999, and in 2004 became a member of the European Union. These strategic goals consumed most of the energy of the society and the state, so the western direction definitely dominated the activities of Polish diplomacy. (All in all, it was extremely beneficial, taking into account the great improvement of Poland's international position achieved through these means, including, in particular, the fact that it benefitted from enormous economic achievements).

At the same time, Poles, while keeping in mind the tragic experiences of the distant and more recent past, firmly rejected the option of strategic cooperation with their great neighbour from the East – despite the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the emergence of a new Russia which rose from its ashes. The development of the geopolitical situation in the East raised serious concerns in Warsaw, which were particularly related to the need to ensure state security. Its immediate international environment was clearly destabilised after the collapse of the communist bloc and the emergence of new neighbours whose subjectivity, durability, and future were uncertain (Bieleń, 2011). After joining NATO and the European Union, the situation improved significantly, and Poland, strengthened by

Western alliances, began to play an increasingly active and, at the same time, important role regarding the Eastern European countries.

This applied in particular to Warsaw's aspirations to become one of the main actors in the shaping of an important new instrument of European Union diplomacy, the so-called EU Eastern Policy (Barburska, 2018). Due to its position and potential, Poland was perfectly predisposed to undertake such a role, although it must be admitted that not all of its successive governments attached appropriate significance to this matter. The bold manifestation of these aspirations was the initiative to create the Eastern Partnership (PW) undertaken by Poland and Sweden in 2008[1] (Stępniewski, 2016; Adamczyk, 2014; Milczarek, 2015; Barburska, 2013). The real effects of its operation can be assessed in various ways – on the one hand, there has been a clear rapprochement of some of those countries with the European Union, but on the other hand, Belarus has *de facto* become an opponent of the EU, strongly supporting Russia in its aggressive endeavours.

Nevertheless, with regard to the most important country of the Eastern Partnership, namely Ukraine, there is no doubt that the pro-European aspirations of the authorities and society supported by the European Union (and in particular by Poland) brought about specific results. Its greatest achievement was the obtainment of the status of an EU candidate country, together with Moldova, in June 2022. The drawback was that it took place in the tragic conditions of the Russian-Ukrainian war, which at the same time highlighted the great role of Poland in this region. The Polish society and authorities provided Ukraine with enormous amounts of aid of all kinds, becoming one of its most reliable allies and thus playing a significant role in stopping Russian aggression. Thus, once again, it proved to be the key importance of the eastern direction of Poland's foreign policy, especially in the context of ensuring its security in a broad sense.

The Northern Direction of the Foreign Policy of Poland

As highlighted in the introduction, in terms of the foreign policy of Poland, and apart from the most important western and eastern directions, there are also two other directions; the northern and the southern. Before proceeding to an analysis of the southern direction, which is key to this chapter, it is therefore necessary to briefly discuss the historical and geopolitical conditions of the northern direction.

[1] The Eastern Partnership covered six countries of Eastern Europe: the largest being Ukraine, then Belarus, and then smaller countries such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova.

Historically, there has been an evolution here. While the medieval rulers of Poland tried to shift the borders of their country to the north and gain permanent access to the Baltic Sea, this tendency was clearly halted in later centuries. The development of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was definitely subordinated to the land expansion to the east, which at best included the seizure of the lands currently belonging to the Baltic republics. Therefore, the Polish state was not interested in developing its own flotilla nor the maritime economy, limiting itself to conducting sea-related trade in its own raw materials, such as cereal or wood. (This strongly contrasted with the policy of not only Western European powers such as Spain, England or France, but also with neighbouring Russia, trying to intensively expand its maritime power).

The situation did not change even during the reign of the royal Vasa dynasty in Poland in the 16th and 17th centuries, who came from "maritime" Sweden. Although these rulers appreciated the importance of the development of the maritime potential, they were unable – due to the aforementioned weakness of royal authority – to change the policies of the entire state. Their presence on the throne of Warsaw shows that the northern direction was nevertheless present and relatively important in the foreign policy of the Polish state at that time. Sweden's invasion of Poland in the mid-seventeenth century, which was rightly called the "Swedish Deluge", put an end to this. Its tragic consequences (of which many Poles remain somewhat blissfully unaware) place it in the entire history of Poland as the most devastating conflict in terms of the irretrievable losses inflicted on Polish society, culture, and economy. Poland, after its 1918 rebirth, tried to reverse the policy of the pre-partition state and develop its maritime economy throughout the interwar period, but the limited resources and limited territorial access to the Baltic Sea did not provide any real opportunities. (The construction of Gdynia from scratch, one of the most modern cities and seaports in Europe, was considered a success).

Only after World War II, Poles, with their country's coastline spanning several hundred kilometres, were able to develop significant potential in this area. At the same time, however, Poland was in the communist camp under Soviet tutelage, which limited, and in times of the greatest tensions of the "Cold War" period, even prevented constructive cooperation with the Western countries bordering the Baltic Sea. The paradigm shift in the northern direction of the foreign policy of Poland took place post-1989, and in particular following the accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and the European Union. As part of both of these organisations, Poland executed various bilateral and multilateral

agreements with the Scandinavian countries. An extremely important factor here was the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO in 2022, forced by Russian aggression on Ukraine. As a result, the Baltic Sea became a kind of an "inner lake" of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, which evidently increased Poland's security. This, however, does not change the fact that the northern direction with all its significance, is generally not a priority for the foreign policy of Poland.

Geopolitical and Historical Factors Shaping the Foreign Policy of Poland Towards the Balkans

Moving on to the analysis of the southern direction of Poland's foreign policy, including the Balkans, which is the most interesting as far as we are concerned, it requires a little clarification of the terminological issues. Providing an unambiguous definition of the "Balkans" is not an easy task. According to encyclopedic sources, many geographers, ethnographers, and historians have all tried and failed to establish the natural borders of this region for a long time, which, from a purely geographical perspective, covers the area contemporarily known as the Balkan Peninsula (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1998). The Balkans were initially the European territories conquered by the Ottoman Empire from the 15th century along with those that were under the Habsburg Empire in that region. Starting from the first decades of the nineteenth century, the nations living there began to regain independence and create their own statehood. This lengthy process, one that lasted until modern times, took place both in the form of a fight for national liberation against the rule of Turkey, as well as armed conflicts between individual states and – as exemplified by Yugoslavia – as a result of civil wars. The highly unstable political situation in this region, combined with the extremely complicated ethnic mosaic giving rise to numerous conflicts, gave rise to the term "Balkanisation", denoting a permanent situation of uncertainty, dispute, and chaos.

By the end of the 1980s, the Balkan states covered Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania. Turkey was no longer treated this way; similarly to Greece, which, due to its membership in the European Communities, began to be defined as a Southern European country. Some Balkan sources also included Moldova and the European part of Turkey, and, at the same time, questioned the Balkan character of Romanian Transylvania (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1998). The breakup of Yugoslavia caused a significant change in the political map of the region, which resulted in the emergence of new countries: Slovenia, Croatia,

Serbia,[2] Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H), North Macedonia (originally Macedonia),[3] and Kosovo (Olszewski, 2010a; Wojnicki, 2003; Karadzoski, Adamczyk, 2015; Adamczyk, Karadzoski, 2019). Due to the abovementioned negative terminological connotations, some of these countries persistently attempted to abandon the term "Balkan", the best example of which was Slovenia (Olszewski, 2010a). Its accession to the European Union in 2004, followed by the EU membership of Bulgaria, Romania (2007), and Croatia (2013) meant that these countries ceased to be referred to as the Balkans. From the EU's perspective, its current policy towards the Balkans includes shaping relations with a group of countries defined as the Western Balkans, comprising Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Albania (Babić, 2014).

From a historical perspective, Poland's relations with the Balkan region have been shaped under the southern direction of the foreign policy of Poland. This direction – although, in terms of importance, second to relations with the West and the East – was in certain periods quite significant. The first medieval Polish rulers maintained many types and forms of close contact with Bohemia and Hungary. The apogee of these relations took place during the reign of the Polish-Lithuanian Jagiellonian dynasty, when representatives of this dynasty sat on the Czech and Hungarian thrones. Close political, economic, and cultural ties were established in particular with Hungary. One of the manifestations of this was the emergence of the saying: "Pole and Hungarian brothers be", and in the more serious sphere of political relations – the accession of Hungarian King Stefan Batory to the Polish throne in the 16th century.

Poland's involvement beyond its southern borders led to an inevitable confrontation with the Turkish as they were advancing from the Balkans. One of the first symbols of this centuries-long conflict was the Battle of Varna in Bulgaria in 1444. The troops of the anti-Turkish coalition, led by the Polish King Władysław III, suffered a defeat there and the king himself (later called Ladislaus of Varna) was killed on the battlefield. Over the subsequent centuries, Poland, until its collapse as a result of

[2] In 1991, following a declaration of independence by Slovenia, Croatia, and Macedonia, only the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) comprised of Serbia and Montenegro remained. In 2003, the FRY was transformed into the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, and, in 2006, as a result of the secession of Montenegro, two separate states were created: Serbia and Montenegro.

[3] In 2019, the Macedonian Parliament changed the name of the country from the Republic of Macedonia to the Republic of North Macedonia. This decision was a consequence of an agreement concluded between the governments of Skopje and Athens, ending the long-standing dispute over the name of the Macedonian state.

the partitions, waged vehement battles with Turkey that attacked Polish lands in Ukraine. These fights also took place in lands that are nowadays considered parts of the Balkans (such as Wallachia, which is a historic area of Romania). Another symbol of the fight against the Turkish threat was the victorious battle that was fought in 1683, where the Polish army, led by King Jan III Sobieski, saved the Austrian capital Vienna from being captured by the Turks.

An interesting aspect of this centuries-old Polish/Turkish conflict, with specific implications reaching the present day, is the fact that it did not generate permanent mutual hostility between the two warring nations. (This in direct contrast with, for example, Polish-Russian relations). Admittedly, the Poles who considered their country to be the "bulwark of Christianity" perceived the Turks as an Islamic enemy, but at the same time maintained dynamic economic, social, and even cultural relations with them. A meaningful symbol of this was the adoption by the Polish nobility during the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of many Turkish customs, including the clothing. As a result, no one was particularly surprised to see a Polish, Catholic nobleman on the street, fluent in Latin, dressed in a Turkish-born outer garment called a "kontusz" and who wore a shaved hairstyle and carried a curved sabre in accordance with Turkish patterns.

The Turks, in turn, seemed to respect Poles as their opponents, which was evident in the fact that the Ottoman Empire was the only European power that did not officially recognise the partitions of Poland. Thus, according to historical records, at the annual meetings with the diplomatic corps in Istanbul, the sultan would ask a rhetorical question of where the Polish envoy was, always receiving the answer that he was on his way. Such positive connotations, as it has been with the Hungarians, may, to a certain extent, affect Poland's relations with a given country located in this case in the southern direction of Poland's foreign policy.

Interest in this direction was also maintained by the revived, post-1918 Polish state. Although the government in Warsaw was primarily concerned with maintaining equal relations with Germany and Soviet Russia, it also tried to ensure good or even allied relations with the Balkan country of Romania. This brought positive results during the German-Soviet aggression against Poland in September 1939, when the Polish government and part of the army managed to flee to that particular ally's territory. Although the Romanian authorities formally interned the arriving Poles, they in fact facilitated their escape to Western Europe, thus enabling them to pursue military combat.

After World War II, Poland and the states located to the south, including almost all Balkan countries (save for Greece and the European

part of Turkey), were incorporated in the communist camp. This camp was not a monolith, as countries such as Albania (pursuing a policy of self-isolation) and especially Yugoslavia with its policy of non-alignment, were not directly dominated by the Soviet Union (Czekalski, Hauziński, Leśny, 2009; Habowski, 2016). The remaining countries, however, established their mutual relations by following the guidelines coming from Moscow. An anecdotal example of this type of cooperation are the efforts to use the abovementioned Battle of Varna for propaganda purposes. That confrontation was then portrayed as a pioneering, symbolic manifestation of the fight between the armies of the Warsaw Pact member states and an aggressive Turkey belonging to imperialist NATO (sic!).

Contemporary Relations Between Poland and the Balkans

As in the case of other directions of the foreign policy of Poland, 1989 became a new turning point in Poland's relations with the Balkans. These relations were underpinned by new, fully sovereign and democratic foundations, and their course can be divided into two main phases:

1) the first phase, covering the years 1989–2004, i.e., the period from the demise of the Eastern Bloc to Poland's accession to the EU,
2) the second phase, covering the period after 2004 to date.

When analysing the contemporary foreign policy of Poland towards the Balkans, it should be highlighted that it is implemented in two main dimensions. The first applies to bilateral relations, which are quite limited and far too modest for such a sizeable Central European state. The second dimension applies to multilateral relations resulting from Poland's membership in various international organisations actively operating in the region, i.e., NATO, the OSCE, the United Nations, and, undoubtedly, the European Union. At the same time, Poland is particularly engaged in the activities of some structures operating within the EU, such as the Visegrad Group or the Berlin Process.

Poland's Relations with the Balkan States Between 1989–2004

Generally speaking, in the first years following the collapse of the Communist Bloc, the Polish government failed to develop any independent, coherent policy towards the Balkans. This was primarily due to the fact that Poland had clearly declared its aspirations to join the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance. This required Warsaw to demonstrate its support for decisions made by members of these structures, on whose consent, after all, possible accessions depended. Hence, Poland had to be

very careful in managing its diplomacy in order to avoid tensions with any of the EU or NATO members. Poland's actions were, therefore, basically limited to observing and following the position of Western Europe and the USA. It should, however, be emphasised that this policy did not mean complete inertia. Poland, which wanted to present itself as a credible and responsible ally, actively supported the activities of Western countries in the Balkans and even became directly involved, primarily through its participation in various peace missions discussed in the subsequent parts of this article.

This is well illustrated by Poland's position towards the disintegration processes in Yugoslavia, which led to civil war in that country. Initially, Warsaw observed the process of the break-up of Yugoslavia through the prism of the uncertain situation across its eastern border. They feared a "domino effect", i.e., that the Balkan events would affect the acceleration and the uncontrolled collapse of the Soviet Union, which, similar to Yugoslavia, was then torn by internal conflicts. Hence, Polish diplomacy behaved in a very cautious and anticipating manner, carefully observing and following the Western countries. Since at that time the United States clearly assigned the solution to the Yugoslav conflict to Europe, Poland supported the position of the European Communities. Initially, they called for the preservation of the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia and refrained from recognising the independence proclaimed by Slovenia and Croatia, expecting peaceful resolutions. However, when it turned out that the Slovenes and Croats demanded their independence, and the government in Belgrade was trying to maintain the unity of the country using the Serbian army, the EC states proclaimed the recognition of the independence of both of these countries.

Warsaw, placated at that time by the execution of the Belovezh Accords enabling the peaceful dissolution of the USSR, followed the decisions of the European Community Member States and, on 21 January 1992, also recognised the sovereignty of Croatia and Slovenia (Orzelska, 2011). The same applied in the case of other countries that emerged out of the ashes of the former Yugoslavia, which were successively recognised by the EC Member States, and a few days later also recognised by Poland. This referred to Bosnia and Herzegovina (recognised by Warsaw on 9 April 1992), as well as Macedonia, whose process of international legitimation was extended due to the dispute with Greece over the name (Stawowy-Kawka, 2000; Olszewski, 2010b). Finally, Poland recognised this country on 28 December 1993 under its technical name agreed at the United Nations: the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM).

As has already been highlighted hereinabove, Poland's following in the footsteps of Western diplomacy with regard to the Balkan issues did not mean passivity. The participation of Polish contingents and representatives in various missions carried out in the Balkans by both NATO and the EU, as well as the UN and CSCE/OSCE demonstrated that. Polish soldiers took part, *inter alia*, in the extremely difficult and dangerous mission of the United Nations Protection Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where, in 1992–1995, they served, working towards the resolution of the conflict between Serbs and Croats. Following the signing of the Dayton Agreement in 1995 on the future of B&H, Poles continued to serve in the Implementation Force under NATO operations, and subsequently in the Stabilization Force, which was to ensure the implementation of peace provisions and stabilise the situation in the fledgling state (Smolarek, 2016). It should be emphasised that during the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the position of Polish diplomacy was in line with the general stance of the international community calling for peace and condemning the crimes of genocide and violations of human rights. Warsaw, however, did not come up with any initiatives itself and conditioned its position upon the decisions of the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance.

The beginning of the 1990s brought about the gradual regulation and establishment of Poland's relations with the other Balkan states underpinned by new, democratic principles. This applied to, *inter alia*, relations with Bulgaria and Romania, which translated into the signing of treaties on friendly relations and cooperation with these countries in 1993 (Pacuła, 2015; Koseski, 2019; Czernicka, 2019). They shared common concerns as regards the unstable situation in the East, support for building the Ukrainian state, and the pursuit to join the structures of European and Euro-Atlantic integration, which was treated as an indispensable security guarantee (Kotulewicz-Wisińska, 2018). Romania and Bulgaria were particularly interested in the de-escalation of the conflict in Yugoslavia, and therefore Poland, by signing treaties with both countries, also expressed deep concern about the development of the situation in the Balkans (Czernicka, 2019). The main outcome of these agreements was, nevertheless, the advancement of economic exchange and mutual support *en route* to NATO and the EU. Poland's engagement in the resolution of the Yugoslav conflict, however, remained at the level of declaration issuance, and the subsequent waiting for decisions to emanate from the Western countries. At that time, Warsaw also tried to strengthen its relations with Albania, which was manifested by the signing of a number of economic and technical agreements by both governments. Political

relations, however, remained limited due to the very unstable situation in Albania (Balcer, 2008).

Warsaw played a slightly more active role in the attempts to resolve the conflict between Kosovars and the government in Belgrade throughout 1998-1999. Taking advantage of its Chairmanship of the CSCE/OSCE in 1998, and in order to present itself to the Western countries as an active and credible ally, Poland succeeded – mainly thanks to the diplomatic endeavours of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Bronisław Geremek – in concluding an agreement in Belgrade in 1998 to establish the Kosovo Verification Mission. This mission was to monitor the situation in the rebellious region and strengthen cooperation between the OSCE and NATO (Orzelska, 2011). The following year, however, the conflict escalated, leading to a US-inspired NATO military intervention in Serbia that took the form of bombing raids to stop the Belgrade government from ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. This time, Warsaw showed no activity, limiting itself to providing diplomatic support to the actions of the United States. (Poland did not participate in military operations due to the lack of technical compatibility of its armed forces with the aviation-based capabilities of the NATO members at that time). Poles, however, joined the Kosovo Force (KFOR) mission, whose objective was to restore stability and guarantee security in the region. Polish soldiers also took part in the NATO-led operation Albania Force (AFOR), under which they provided humanitarian aid to Kosovar refugees in Albania (Arnold, 2019).

It should be reemphasised that the main determinant of Poland's position was the pursuit of European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation membership, which required Poland to show full loyalty to future allies (Zając, 2015). For this reason, Warsaw fully supported NATO's intervention in Serbia. In the absence of the UN Security Council's approval of the mission, Polish diplomacy reiterated the arguments of Western countries that the intervention was aimed only at resolving the humanitarian crisis, protecting human rights, and putting an end to ethnic cleansing in Kosovo (Zięba, 2013). The adoption of such an attitude had positive effects, which probably contributed to the official accession of Poland to NATO on 12 March 1999.

Warsaw once again demonstrated its loyalty to its Western allies during the next conflict, a conflict caused by the break-up of Yugoslavia. The crisis in Kosovo, a country sharing a border at that time with the Republic of Macedonia, contributed to the outbreak of riots in 2001, in which the Albanian people opposed the government in Skopje. The European Union and NATO, including Poland, were once again involved in resolving this

conflict. Poland took part in the EU-led military mission CONCORDIA, which was primarily aimed at stabilising relations between the Albanian community and the Macedonian government. Once that operation had been fulfilled, the European Union initiated a new mission in 2003, this time a police operation under the name of PROXIMA, in which Poland also played its role (Smolarek, 2016; Szpala, 2008; Podgórzańska, 2015).

The stance towards the conflicts in Yugoslavia inevitably influenced the perception of Poland by the Balkan states, especially Croatia and Serbia. On the one hand, the Croatian government undoubtedly recognised Warsaw as its political ally by strengthening mutual relations (Podgórzańska, 2013). On the other hand, relations with Belgrade soured, although at the same time the Polish government, wishing to maintain historically decent relations with this country, refrained from criticising Serbia. Warsaw officially justified its position with the need to maintain European security and protect human rights, when in fact it was really all about striving to play the role of a loyal NATO and EU ally (Habowski, 2016).

At the same time, Poland was perceived in the Balkans as a successful country in terms of political and economic transformation, and one which had already become a member of NATO and was conducting accession negotiations with the European Union. Therefore, the Polish experience became particularly valuable, especially for those countries in the region that applied for NATO membership. This applied to Romania and Bulgaria, which considered Poland a proponent of their Euro-Atlantic aspirations. The government in Warsaw, in turn, hoped that providing these countries with support would lead to the formation of a coalition in the future that would support the fundamental objectives of Poland's foreign policy regarding the weakening of Russia's influence in Eastern Europe (Koseski, 2019). The subsequent NATO enlargement in March 2004 was a success in the implementation of that plan. Romania and Bulgaria became new members of the Alliance, along with five other post-communist countries: Slovenia, Slovakia, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, i.e., countries that particularly feared a revival of Russian power and were also interested in EU integration.

Poland's Relationship with the Balkan States post-2004

Decades-long efforts of Polish society and authorities to fulfil various membership criteria produced a historical success, which was the country's accession to the European Union on 1 May 2004. The EU accession, along with its prior NATO membership, translated into the implementation of the crucial foreign policy goals that the governments

in Warsaw set for themselves post-1989. Achieving these goals emphasised the key importance of the western and eastern direction of Poland's foreign policy: as for the West, the goal was a permanent anchoring in the structures of European and Euro-Atlantic integration, and in terms of the East – stable security guarantees against Russia. It is, therefore, not surprising that the southern direction, including relations with the Balkans, was not treated as a priority. At the same time, however, it should be highlighted that the security guarantees and stable development of Poland owing to the European Union and NATO membership closed a certain era in its foreign policy and opened up new opportunities. This admittedly referred primarily to the EU's eastern policy, within which Poland, being the largest and most important of the new members, could naturally play a significant role (Barburska, 2018; Barburska, Milczarek, 2014).

This does not change the fact that Warsaw was also interested in the development of the situation in the Balkans since ensuring European security depended to a large extent on the extinction and stabilisation of conflicts in this region (Żornaczuk, 2010; Tereszkiewicz, 2013). It was also in Poland's interest to weaken Russia's influence in the Balkan peninsula. Polish diplomacy, however, was aware of its limited possibilities and left the Balkan direction to the more interested and more powerful Western states (Domagała, 2014). This was, in a sense, a continuation of the previous policy towards the Balkans, but it must be emphasised that there was a significant change here. Namely, Poland's role, figuratively speaking, increased from a "pre-EU subcontractor" to a "limited contractor/co-creator" of the EU's Balkan policy.

It consisted mainly in strong support for the process of the European Union's enlargement to the Balkans, as it also meant weakening Russia's position in this part of Europe. For this reason, Warsaw supported the accession efforts of Romania and Bulgaria, which joined the EU in 2007 (Koseski, 2019). Two years later, Poland signed a declaration concerning strategic partnership with Romania providing for cooperation on security and cooperation in key economic sectors (Kotulewicz-Wisińska, 2018). The accession of both countries enhanced the coalition built by Warsaw to strengthen the EU's eastern policy. Romania and Bulgaria did indeed declare their support for the Polish/Swedish initiative to establish the Eastern Partnership in 2009, but of course, in return, they expected Poland's involvement in endorsing further EU and NATO enlargement to the Balkans. By the same token, the support for this enlargement was in line with Polish interests comprising the further enlargement of the EU by the Eastern Partnership countries (Żornaczuk, 2019).

Poland's interest in the Balkans also stemmed from its membership in the Visegrad Group (V4) (Żornaczuk, 2012). Since Warsaw tried to use this forum to enforce its own interests within the European Union, it had to be open to the demands of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary. The government in Budapest was specifically interested in stabilising the situation in the Balkan region, as Hungary bordered it directly, including, in particular, Serbia, which played a disgraceful role in the break-up of Yugoslavia. It comes as no surprise, then, that Hungarians consistently, starting from their presidency of the V4 in 2005, included the policy towards the Balkans among the priorities of this organisation (Griessler, 2018). Hence, Poland had to show solidarity with Hungary if it wanted to benefit from their reciprocity in the execution of the Eastern Partnership.

What is more, all members of the Visegrad Group were also participants of the informal Group of Friends of EU Enlargement (the so-called Tallinn Group), whose aim was to support the accession aspirations of Eastern European and Balkan countries.[4] The Balkan states were promised membership, without declaring a specific date, at an EU summit in Thessaloniki in 2003, where the Thessaloniki Agenda encouraging the Balkan countries to meet membership criteria by carrying out comprehensive reforms was adopted. The conclusion of bilateral stabilisation and association agreements with interested countries was to assist in obtaining that objective (Marcinkowska, 2015). In 2005–2008, such agreements were signed by the European Union with Croatia, Albania, Montenegro, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina; and in 2005 Macedonia (FYROM) was granted the status of EU candidate (Łakota-Micker, 2016; Olszewski, 2010a; Adamczyk, 2018). As a Member State, Poland fully supported any undertakings helping to draw the Balkan states into the European Union's sphere of influence.

One of the first major challenges for Poland's Balkan policy post its accession to the EU was the recognition of Kosovo's independence, announced in February 2008 (Pawłowski, 2008). This issue divided Member States, some of which recognised the new state and some opposed it,[5] which resulted in no common position being adopted on that matter (Pawłowski, 2016; 2018). There was also a visible split between Polish politicians, as some of them feared that Moscow would use this act as

[4] Besides the V4 countries, the Group incorporated: Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Romania, Finland, Slovenia, Sweden, and Italy (before Brexit, there was also the UK).

[5] Kosovo's independence has not been recognised by Spain, Slovakia, Romania, Greece, or Cyprus.

a pretext to fuel separatism in post-Soviet countries, as it was the case in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and the Transnistria (Balcer, 2019). Concerns regarding the strengthening of Serbia's ties with Russia also arose, which eventually did happen as demonstrated by the Serbs giving up control over their energy sector to Russian companies. In order to stabilise the situation in the Balkans after Kosovo's declaration of independence, NATO decided to include Albania and Croatia in its structures in 2009, which was obviously approved by Poland.

In terms of the independence of Kosovo, the Polish government once again adopted a wait-and-see, inactive attitude. Only after a decision from the United States and the largest EU countries (Germany, France, and Great Britain) to recognise Kosovo, did Poland follow suit. The official argument for recognising Kosovo was to ensure peace and security in the region, but at the same time Warsaw announced that it cannot be treated as a precedent and, being a one-off act, cannot be used by other countries (Wiśniewski, 2017). A decision not to establish diplomatic relations was also made, hence Poland is yet to have an embassy in Pristina, and bilateral relations have been conducted at a very low official level. By doing so, Poland wanted to send a signal to the government in Belgrade of its support and sympathy.

After the outbreak of the financial and, subsequently, economic crisis in Europe in 2008, relations between the European Union and the Balkans began to dwindle, and the same applied to Poland's engagement in the region. It clearly showed to what extent Warsaw's relations with the Balkan countries were dependent on the policy pursued by the European Union, especially by its most powerful Member States. This practically meant that the Polish government, focused on the Eastern Partnership, still did not recognise the Balkan direction as a priority in its foreign policy. The fact that Romania and Bulgaria ceased to be considered Balkan after their accession to the EU also contributed to that, and relations with them simply became an element of relations within the European Union.

A change to that reserved attitude was effected by the upcoming Polish presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of 2011. The government in Warsaw realised that this function obligated them to take care of the interests of the entire community, which requires moving past narrow partisan interests (Podgórzańska, 2012). For this reason, one of the main priorities of the Polish Presidency was to develop and continue the process of the European Union's enlargement, which was also to include the Balkan states. Polish diplomacy benefitted to a large extent from the achievements of the previous Hungarian Presidency, which supported the accession process of its neighbours Croatia and Serbia

with great perseverance. Warsaw's plans with regard to its presidency encompassed the achievement of three main goals: signing the accession treaty with Croatia, starting accession negotiations with Montenegro, and granting Serbia candidate-country status (Żornaczuk, 2019).

It should be emphasised that Poland made great efforts to duly prepare for the implementation of these tasks, intensifying its diplomatic endeavours with regard to the countries of the Western Balkans. Prime Minister Donald Tusk, for instance, paid a visit to Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia, and Minister of Foreign Affairs Radosław Sikorski went to Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Żornaczuk, 2019). As part of Polish-Macedonian relations, the Skopje Conference[6] was established, whose aim it was to share with Macedonians the Polish experiences as regards accession negotiations, including the initiative of the Enlargement Academy (Domaradzki, Fronczak, 2018). At the same time, Polish diplomacy had to ensure a proper promotional campaign among the then Member States, where symptoms of fatigue with the enlargements had begun to appear.

Poland did not manage to achieve all the goals set with regard to the Balkans, but without doubt the signing of the accession treaty with Croatia on 9 December 2011 was a great success (Babić, 2012). (The Polish government tried to sign the treaty in Warsaw, but, in the end, the ceremony took place in Brussels). The other two objectives were not accomplished during the Polish Presidency. Poland, however, did manage to organise an Eastern Partnership summit in Warsaw, which once again proved that Poland was prioritising the eastern direction of its foreign policy at the expense of the Balkan direction. This was clearly visible post Poland's presidency, when relations with the Balkans weakened again, save for Warsaw's activity within the Visegrad Group. During its presidency in this Group at the turn of 2012–2013, Poland held meetings with the ministers of foreign affairs of Romania and Bulgaria, and at that time V4 members decided to increase the budget of the International Visegrad Fund, which provided grants for education, culture, and tourism in *inter alia* the countries of the Western Balkans. It should be highlighted, however, that the effects of such undertakings were limited, as the budget was relatively modest, amounting to only 7.5 million euros in 2012.

Poland's real interest in its relations with the Balkan states is clearly demonstrated by the lack of highlighting them or even listing them in an

[6] The Skopje Conference was modeled on the earlier Utrecht Conference, during which the Dutch shared their experiences with Polish officials preparing for accession negotiations with the EU.

important document on the priorities of Polish diplomacy for the years 2012–2016 (National Security Bureau, 2012). The cooperation with the Western Balkans was mentioned there only to declare support for the EU's enlargement policy, and it was alongside Ukraine, Moldova, the South Caucasus, and Turkey. Therefore, Poland returned to the previous model of passive and declarative policy, i.e., making its relations with the Balkans dependent on the progress in their development made within the entire European Union. This approach was manifested by Warsaw through its obvious support for such undertakings as commenting on negotiation talks with Montenegro and granting Serbia candidate-country status in 2012, which had both been previously planned by Poland but eventually negotiated by Brussels. In the latter case, Poland refrained itself from expressing some concern regarding relations between Belgrade and Moscow it regarded as being too close.

Croatia's accession to the European Union in 2013 was the last great success in the EU's policy towards the Balkans At that time, Poland declared its support for the project proposed by Brussels to create a "Baltic-Adriatic Corridor" aimed at building rail, road, sea, air, and energy connections between Poland and Croatia (Podgórzańska, 2013). This was a signal from the Polish government that it was seriously interested in expanding the traditional directions of Polish diplomacy. Even though Croatia itself wanted to cease to be identified as a Balkan country after its EU accession, nevertheless, this project provided for the possibility of incorporating other countries from the region.

The protracted financial and economic crisis, however, which forced the Member States to concentrate their efforts on combating its effects was a significant factor diminishing the European Union's interest in the Balkans. This went hand in hand with the aforementioned signs of enlargement fatigue. No wonder, then, that the new President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, inaugurating the institution's five-year term in 2014, explicitly stated that no countries were expected to join the European Union (Adamczyk, 2018). All of the foregoing had a negative impact on EU-Balkan relations, in particular on the accession aspirations of the countries in the region. The prospect of membership in the European Union had been the most effective incentive for those countries to carry out comprehensive reforms in line with EU criteria. The deferment of enlargement policy, as well as the restriction in economic cooperation caused by the crisis, constitutes a stimulus for Balkan politicians to seek alternative solutions. This could go either in the direction of strengthening cooperation with Russia (which constantly tried to maintain and expand its influence in the region), or of establishing

new ties with China, which in turn undertook a political and economic offensive at that time, offering European countries extensive cooperation under the so-called "16 + 1" format (Olszewski, Chojan, 2017; Balcer, 2019).

One way or another, EU-Balkan relations weakened, which without doubt, also translated into even less interest of the Polish diplomacy in this region. A clear shift in this respect occasioned only with the Law and Justice party assuming power in Warsaw at the end of 2015. The new government stepped away from prioritising the Western direction of Poland's foreign policy, in particular the close cooperation with Germany. Members of the Visegrad Group were from now on recognised as the main allies, and the United Kingdom was to be a strategic partner (which, although strongly it supported the idea of EU enlargement, including the Balkan countries, was on the verge of the Brexit referendum).

Warsaw, therefore, began to pursue the southern direction of its foreign policy by launching and promoting the Three Seas Initiative project. The project was to strengthen cooperation between the EU Member States located between the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic seas. 12 countries formally joined the Initiative,[7] which aimed to construct a dense infrastructure network in the transportation, energy and telecommunications sectors (Stępniewski, 2018; Ukielski, 2018). The geographic scope of this project was to end with Croatia and Bulgaria, but it did not exclude the possibility to extend it to other Balkan countries in the future. From a theoretical perspective, the Three Seas Initiative may seem useful, but the Law and Justice government not only failed to gain the political support of the entire EU for this project, but also found themselves in conflict with the EU as regards, *inter alia*, the rule of law. As a result, the ambitiously outlined project, which was supposed to be Warsaw's flagship success, did not really fit into the entire foreign policy of the EU and so far has not brought any spectacular results.

The Polish government instead focussed its efforts on the aforementioned Group of Friends of EU Enlargement, which resulted in, among other things, an intensification of bilateral relations with Serbia and Albania (Wiśniewski, 2017). Relations with Serbia, which is the largest Balkan state outside the European Union and, at the same time, the most susceptible to Russian influence, were considered to be of particular importance. In order to provide the Serbs with assistance and share Polish experience in the accession process, in 2017 the Belgrade Conference, modelled on the former Skopje Conference, was launched (Szpala, 2014;

[7] These were members of the V4, the Baltic States, Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Romania. The project also gained the support of the United States.

Domaradzki, Fronczak, 2018). A year later, the similar Tirana Conference was announced to support Albania's accession negotiations. Poland also supported Montenegro's efforts to obtain NATO membership, which took place in 2017 despite the provocation organised in Podgorica by Russia (Kuczyński, 2019).

The announcement by the European Commission of a new strategy towards the Western Balkans in 2018 was of significant importance to EU/Balkan relations. This initiative stemmed, on the one hand, from the dwindling relations between the Balkan states and the European Union, and on the other – the growing activity of other international actors in this region, i.e., Russia, China, and Turkey, which threatened the stabilisation of the situation in the Balkans and could therefore endanger European security. The European Commission announced the strengthening of mutual cooperation by systematically integrating the Balkan states into the legal and institutional system of the EU in the sectoral dimension. Establishing a sectoral network of connections, i.e., within the key economic, technological, infrastructure sectors, etc., was to strengthen ties between the Balkan states and the European Union in a tangible and practical way, and, at the same time, undermine the possibilities of their being influenced by other powers. The European Commission was so optimistic that it even projected Serbia's and Montenegro's accession by 2025 (Szpala, 2018). In the same year, the first EU-Western Balkans summit in fifteen years was held in Sofia, which validated – although quite cautiously – the region's membership prospects.

The new strategy of the European Commission was underpinned by the experience, initiated by Germany in 2014, of the Berlin Process, which encompassed a large number of EU Member States and institutions, as well as the Balkan states.[8] Poland joined this platform in 2018 after the European Commission announced a new strategy towards the Balkans, recognising it as being complementary – to a large extent – to the Three Seas Initiative. A year later, the government in Warsaw held a Berlin Process summit in Poznań, where key issues for the integration of this region with the European Union were discussed. The establishment of the Regional Economic Area was to be the flagship project of the Berlin Process in that respect. The idea was to create a "common market in the Western Balkans" emulating the one operating in the EU (based on the

[8] These are the EU Member States of Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Greece, Germany, Poland, Slovenia, Italy; such EU institutions as the European Commission, the European Investment Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the Balkan states of Montenegro, Serbia, North Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo.

freedom of movement of people, goods, services, and capital), i.e., an area that could easily be integrated with the European Union economy.

In terms of Poland, the very fact it held the summit of the Berlin Process and showed support to its ambitious projects may indicate a willingness to develop Polish-Balkan relations. The real intentions of Warsaw, however, raise some doubts, since in another key government document "Strategy of Polish Foreign Policy 2017–2021", the Balkan direction is basically non-existent. The document included only the general will to support the EU enlargement process, meaning the current government reiterated similar, former-government declarations in the previous instrument. Another factor substantially limiting the activity of Polish diplomacy was the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe at the beginning of 2020. Poland, like other European countries, focused on combating the pandemic, which inevitably marginalised non-priority issues, such as relations with the Balkans. It should only be highlighted that, in order to maintain good relations with the countries of the region, Warsaw made a symbolic gesture of sending a minor shipment of medical products to combat COVID-19 to countries such as Albania, B&H, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia (Website the Republic of Poland, 2020).

Launched in February 2022, Russia's open aggression against Ukraine has redirected the attention of the entire world to the situation in the south-eastern part of Europe. Poland is without doubt deeply interested in how this situation develops, and has undertaken various activities (including providing significant support to Ukraine), aimed at eradicating Russia's aggressive policy as well as limiting its influence in the Balkans. Warsaw tried to use its OSCE Chairmanship in 2022 to that objective. Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Zbigniew Rau, as the chairman of this organisation, paid a series of visits in June and July 2022 to the Western Balkans, i.e., Montenegro, Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia, B&H and Kosovo. Russia was indicated as the greatest threat to security and peace in Europe in the discussions with Balkan politicians (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs). One should, however, be aware that there are a great many more such threats that, unfortunately, also result from the unstable situation in the Balkan Peninsula. One of the latest examples may be the renewed tension in Kosovo's relations with Serbia that occasioned in July and August 2022, which, despite the potentially dangerous repercussions, did not generate much interest in a number of European capitals, including Warsaw.

Conclusions

As has been argued in this chapter, in order to adequately assess the real significance of the role and place of relations with the Balkans in the overall foreign policy of Poland, a broader background is required, taking into account the various factors that have shaped this policy. The most important of these are geopolitical and historical factors, i.e., the location of the Polish state on the map of Europe shifting throughout history, which naturally determined four main directions of its foreign policy. Two of these directions: the west and the east, have always been of priority importance for the preservation of the Polish state and for the advancement of Polish society. Relations with powerful neighbours, i.e., Germany and Russia, consequently dominated Poland's foreign policy both in earlier periods and post-1989.

Hence, the relations with the West and the East remain a priority to this day – even though successive governments attached different emphasis to them in their diplomatic endeavours. There is no surprise that the remaining directions of foreign policy of Poland are to a greater or lesser extent overshadowed by priority relations. This also applies to the southern direction, which includes relations with the Balkan countries in a broad sense. From a historical perspective, this direction was not completely marginal, especially in the context of the centuries-long struggle of Poland with Turkish expansion, but in recent times the importance of this direction has significantly diminished.

The situation emanated from the key fact that Polish foreign policy after 1989 was clearly dominated by the adamant pursuit of membership in the European and Euro-Atlantic integration structures: the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. The implementation of this strategic goal was rightly recognised as ensuring Poland's political and military security (especially in the context of relations with Russia), as well as stable economic and social development. Without having too much potential, Warsaw therefore subjected almost all of its foreign policy efforts to the requirements of cooperation with future allies from the West. This applied in particular to such areas as relations with the Balkans, where Poland's national interests have never been neither crucial, nor clearly defined. (The exception here is the question of ensuring security by withstanding Russia's influence that has historically been rooted in the Balkan region).

Because of the foregoing factors, Poland's policy towards the Balkans seemed extremely reserved and clearly passive. Polish diplomacy tried only to keep pace with the position of Western allies, without actively proposing

any ideas and initiatives. This policy persisted until the key objective of joining NATO in 1999 and then the EU in 2004 was achieved. In later years, however, the situation did not change significantly, despite some attempts to activate Balkan policy by successive governments in Warsaw, including putting forward initiatives related to the European Council Presidency or the Chairmanship in the OSCE or the Berlin Process. One can state that Warsaw has, at best, been promoted from the role of a "subcontractor" to the not-very-actively-played role of a "co-contractor/co-creator" of the European Union's policy towards the Balkans.

On the one hand, Poland's Balkan policy can be assessed as something pragmatic since it was subordinated to the main geostrategic goals, namely integration with the West, and the protection against the East. Because state resources were limited, it did not leave much room for activity in other areas, such as the Balkans, with which no closer economic cooperation was established. On the other hand, Poland's post-1989 potential and international position have been systematically growing, which should create much greater opportunities for the development of mutual relations. But these opportunities have not been fully seized, and Warsaw's policy can be assessed as auto-marginalisation, pursued without consequences and devoid of a broader, long-term strategy.

Poland should take greater account of the crucial fact that the Balkans still remain an unstable and conflict-prone region in which neighbouring powers such as Russia, China, and Turkey are playing a game wherein the stakes are Europe's peace and security (Olszewski, Chojan, 2017; Kopyś, 2018; Balcer, 2019). This can only be counteracted by the strengthening of the European Union's influence in the region and establishing closer ties with as many Balkan states as possible. Therefore, expressing strong support for the process of EU enlargement in this region and actively displaying initiative instead of limiting itself to mere declarations is in Poland's own interests. Polish diplomacy should, for example, provide extensive support to the Balkan states in those areas in which it succeeded, i.e., as regards political and economic transformation. And where Warsaw is unable to offer such assistance, it should use its membership in the EU and NATO to consistently initiate and implement such projects. Poland's relations with the Balkans are by no means consigned to marginalisation.

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Poland and NATO. Lessons for the Balkans

Abstract
This paper seeks to explore Poland and Central and Eastern Europe's journey to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization as a part of a larger effort to build new security architecture in Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the onset of the "unipolar moment" (Krauthammer, 1990) in the history of both the continent and the world. That necessary setting serves as a vehicle to look for answers regarding the part NATO might play in the new era of systemic rivalry between the great powers on the global scene, and an aggressive Russia waging both conventional and hybrid wars in Europe. This examination is needed to see what lessons the Balkan nations could learn from Poland's experience as well as from the current Zeitenwende or, in English, turning point in history, with NATO's comeback as a hard security provider for Europe.

Keywords: Poland, NATO, Russia, European Union, Enlargement

Introduction – European Security Architecture After the Cold War

The end of the Cold War opened a unique window of opportunity for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe to re-join the West after 44 years of being part of a Soviet bloc dominated by Moscow. The unexpected demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to the formation of 14 independent countries and a chaotic transformation of Russia itself from a state of totalitarianism to an oligarchic democracy. In Poland, the

early 1990s was a time of re-organising the political, social, and economic structures of the state, based on the re-introduction of democracy, the rule of law, a market economy, a free media, and civic society. To a large extent, it was a remodelling of the system in accordance with Western principles while taking into consideration local characteristics.

The new Europe, emerging from the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989 and the Soviet Union two years later, was marked pretty much by Francis Fukuyama's impression that this very new era actually was, as he phrased it, "the end of history" (Fukuyama, 1989). In strategic terms, Europe attained a level of geopolitical security not experienced since 1945. It seemed that the struggle for peace, security, and democratic order had been won for good, but this time also and especially for Central and Eastern Europe. Moreover, the perception was that the space between Vladivostok, Dublin, and Lisbon was finally becoming an area of common security and prosperity (Bershidsky, 2014). There was the view that there had not been a better time for Europe than that which was being witnessed at that point in time with only one superpower left in charge of global affairs – the United States.

Despite this feeling, Poland and other countries of the CEE region applied for membership in the European Communities and NATO immediately after leaving the Soviet bloc. Both organisations were synonymous with freedom, security, and a better future. In order to achieve this desired result, Poland, Hungary, Czechia, and Slovakia (the former Czechoslovakia) formed the Visegrad Group (Dangerfield, 2011, pp. 293–295).

The ratification of the Maastricht Treaty which implemented the idea of the European Union (EU) went in parallel with the withdrawal of Red Army troops from Poland in September 1993. It is worth noting that the Soviet military presence in this country was substantial; there were more than 60,000 troops, among whom the land forces comprised 40,000, the air forces 17,000, and the Navy 7,000 (IPN, 2022). That freshly-cultivated memory motivated Warsaw in its diplomatic efforts to speed up negotiations with both NATO and the EU.

It took time to persuade the Western political elites that it would be very much in the interests of NATO to enlarge towards the East, on the territories which once belonged to the Warsaw Pact. The USA did not want to worsen the domestic situation of the Russian leader Boris Yeltsin, as he was considered a prospective partner for the Americans (Savranskaya, 2018). The West was hoping that Russia could become a genuinely democratic country and partner.

At the same time, Poland and other countries of the region were keen to join NATO as the only reliable security provider. It was partly because

of lessons learned from history, and partly because of a lack of trust vis-à-vis a newly-born Russian Federation and its political elites. From a 2022 perspective, it is evident it was an incredibly smart strategy, and a crucial decision for the future of the CEE.

NATO Enlargement

Poland and other Central and Eastern European nations made their way, albeit gradually, to full NATO membership. Already in 1991, they joined a newly formed NACC – the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NATO, 2022b). One of the more dramatic moments was Yeltsin's subsequent visit to Warsaw in August, 1993. In a joint statement from Polish President Lech Wałęsa and the Russian President, the latter declared his de facto no objection to the perspective of Poland's NATO membership (Savranskaya, Blanton, 2018).

Soon after, however, Yeltsin changed his mind – most likely under the pressure from the Russian military establishment – and, in a letter to the US President Bill Clinton, he expressed his opposition to the idea (Savranskaya, Blanton, 2018). Instead, Yeltsin offered to issue – jointly with the USA and its Western allies – security guarantees covering Poland and other Central and Eastern European countries. It is worth noting that similar 'assurances' but not 'guarantees' were actually provided for Ukraine in the now infamous "Budapest Memorandum" of 1994, also signed by Yeltsin and Clinton, among others (Yost, 2015).

The year 1994 was also marked by the establishment of the Partnership for Peace (PfP) whose aim was to "(…) enable participants to develop an individual relationship with NATO, choosing their own priorities for cooperation, and the level and pace of progress" (NATO, 2022a). Poland and other Visegrad Group states were invited by Washington to accede that format which, however, was met with disappointment in Warsaw. The PfP was not seen by the Visegrad Group members as the final destination in their transatlantic journey. On the other hand, many American politicians and officials held firm the view that Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary should not be admitted to NATO, and that the Partnership for Peace actually meant that NATO enlargement was out of the question (Savranskaya, Blanton, 2018). In the USA itself, the Polish cause found massive support from the country's large diaspora of Americans with Polish heritage (Malendowicz, 2013).

In Europe, the fall of Berlin Wall and the subsequent German unification of October 3rd 1990 created a necessary opportunity to begin reconciliation efforts between both nations. German support for Poland's NATO

aspirations was critical as was the strong backing by the only German Secretary General of the Alliance, Manfred Wörner, and Germany's defence minister Volker Ruhe, who vigorously supported the idea of enlarging NATO to include Central and Eastern Europe (Hendrickson, 2014). NATO enlargement was seen by them as consequential for the freshly-unified Germany, as it would cease to be what it had been for decades – the eastern frontier of the Alliance.

A real breakthrough, however, came in January 1994 when US President Bill Clinton declared in Prague that "it was no longer a question of whether NATO would enlarge, but how and when" (Goldgeier, 2002). That declaration caused consternation on both sides of the Atlantic but it was a real milestone for Poland's NATO aspirations and the country's southern neighbours. It allowed them to accept the very concept of Partnership for Peace, interpreted now as a prelude to full membership of the North Atlantic Alliance. Then, in October 1996, in a speech in Detroit, President Clinton offered a precise date for NATO enlargement, stating that it would happen by the end of 1999 when the Alliance was preparing to celebrate its 50th anniversary (NATO, 1996). This wouldn't have happened without strong support for this idea given by two influential people in the Clinton's administration; Secretary of State Madelaine Albright, born in then Czechoslovakia, and by former security advisor to President Jimmy Carter, Zbigniew Brzezinski, born in Poland (Albright, 1997).

A year later, in September 1997, Poland started its accession negotiations with NATO that were completed successfully within two months and then, by November 1998, all member states of the Alliance had ratified the accession protocols. In January 1999, NATO Secretary General Javier Solana formally invited Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary to join the North Atlantic Treaty. On 12th March 1999, Poland's Minister of Foreign Affairs Prof. Bronisław Geremek handed over the act of Poland's accession to the North Atlantic Treaty to Madeleine Albright (BBN, N.D.). Slovakia joined NATO five years later in 2004, together with Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia (NATO, 2022c).

Poland's accession to NATO was one of the country's most important political achievements in the twentieth century. That long-awaited dream finally came true thanks to long-term strategic thinking and consensus among the Polish political elites. It was also strongly supported by Polish society. If NATO had not enlarged as it did, the situation of the CEE region would be completely different today, especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It could be an important lesson for the Balkans – that one has to lay down plans for strategic objectives, and then make every effort to reach them despite political differences and polarisation.

The key issues for a country's *raison d'etat* should never be subjected to internal, short-term goals.

Poland and Europe in a New, Multi-polar World Order

Since the mid-2000s, the relatively safe environment of post-cold-war Europe has gradually moved in a less secure direction. It has happened again due to the tectonic shifts of returning power politics wherein Poland has not had much to say. But the developments of the last 15 years have affected both Poland and the European Union and have uncovered the various difficulties of striking deals, making decisions, and then implementing them in such a complex polity as the EU. It is neither a state nor a federal state, although it has certain elements of a confederation in some areas.

The European Union is an organisation *sui generis* consisting of 27 sovereign states coordinating their foreign and security policies. As far as security is concerned, however, the EU does not act as one entity and needs to strike a consensus. The unanimous decision-making process is a serious challenge when the EU is confronted by states such as China, Russia, and even the USA. The situation has become even more demanding since the birth of a multi-polar world in which China is trying to undermine the US's global position thanks to Beijing's dramatically rising economic power and military prowess.

Since Xi Jinping took leadership of the ruling Communist Party as well as China's military and state institutions back in 2012/2013, Beijing has been acting in a much more assertive and confrontational way than in past decades. It has created a totally new geostrategic situation, and not just for Indo-Pacific nations and the United States. Increasingly, it is becoming a challenge for Europe too. The problem that the European Union is facing in this regard is, however, that as a polity – even though it has an international legal personality – is actually somewhat weak and cannot be a real geopolitical player akin to the major powers. So, Europe is strong as an economy, but is not a powerhouse in terms of foreign and security policy. Beijing and Moscow are well aware of this, and prefer bilateral dealings with key EU members such as France, Germany, or – in some cases – even some of the smaller states. Among such nations which also engage in geopolitical games with the EU's rivals on their own is Hungary, a member of both the EU and the Visegrad Group (Matura, 2022).

The abovementioned intricacies of Europe's foreign and security policy do not make it easier to act as one, especially in the times of the Russian-caused hardships Europe has been collectively witnessing since 24th February 2022. This in spite of the fact that the EU is able to make crucial

decisions such as imposing sanctions on Russia, and, remarkably, this has been the case since Russia's unilateral annexation of Crimea in 2014. After the outright invasion of Ukraine, the EU Member States have managed to constantly agree on new packages of sanctions even if foreign policy processes require a unanimous decision on the part of EU nations. But it is clearly visible that making foreign policy has been too difficult in Europe and is not practical in dangerous times where the eastern borders of EU itself are under threat. Since 24th February 2022, Poland – a Member State of the European Union – has become a frontline country that has already suffered deaths due to the war that is currently being waged by the Kremlin in Ukraine. These irrefutable facts exert pressure on European leaders to rethink the whole process of decision-making in order to streamline it to be equal to the challenge the EU is confronting now.

NATO's Long Way Back

In an unstable political and military environment that, to some extent, is comparable to the times of the early 20th century, NATO has again become a key pillar of Europe's security architecture. Since the end of the cold war until today, the perception of NATO and its role has come full circle. In the 1990s, it was argued that there was no longer a place for NATO as the Warsaw Pact was non-existent, and the Soviet Union had already collapsed in 1991 (McCalla, 1996). In fact, since its inception in 1949, the main purpose of NATO had always been to act as a Soviet deterrent, and – if needed – a form of defence against any Warsaw Pact aggression. But in a post-cold-war Europe, it seemed reasonable that a continent freshly liberated from decades of Soviet oppression should focus on building bridges to a new Russia instead of constructing fences on its eastern reaches. In a Europe such as that, NATO might have been an obsolete relic of the past.

On the other hand, the European Union needed a common security pillar, and NATO represented a possibility to be a foundation under such a project. However, the idea was not feasible for obvious reasons: the North Atlantic Alliance was – and still is – composed of nations that neither belong to the EU, such as Turkey, or even to Europe at all, such as Canada and – of course – the very heart of the Alliance; the United States of America.

Another option was to use NATO somewhere else to strengthen the global security architecture; the various issues affecting the productivity and effectiveness of the United Nations Security Council have been known for decades. The Alliance could somehow supplement the UNSC's actions if they were both required and workable. This was

how NATO was seen and actually used for years from its missions in the former Yugoslavia to the almost two-decades-long deployment in Afghanistan after the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Babst, 2017). In time, the cold war confrontation between the Western and Eastern blocs seemed to be supplanted by less conventional but equally dangerous guerilla and hybrid threats of dispersed non-state actors acting globally. Modern technology has provided powerful weaponry for determined rogue groups, and, as a result, NATO has neither been dissolved nor ceded to the EU, and the Americans, Canadians, and Turks have remained in the sometimes-not-so-united Alliance.

Since both Russia's conventional and hybrid aggressions have approached the European Union's neighbourhood, the original perception of NATO and its purpose have slowly returned. The process started when Russia attacked Georgia in 2008, and continued from 2014 onwards after its takeover of Crimea. But, before 24th February 2022, it had not been fully clear that the Alliance would again play its traditional part in the defence of Europe. However, everything changed after the Kremlin made its decision to start a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Now, even the sceptics have realised that Moscow is a major threat to NATO. It is an enemy. This is how Russian President Vladimir Putin positions himself towards the West. In 2022, NATO's mandate is back to what it was since its inception in 1949; the protection of Europe. This time, however, it is an enlarged Europe and 30 NATO members which must be ready to thwart any aggression, in particular, the old Russian aggression that has become very real once again.

Europe's Security Amid Hybrid and Cyber Security Threats

NATO is back and, at the same time, it is back with the structure of military protection and conventional capacities on the battlefield. However, in the meantime, the whole environment has changed and there is also a new threat which has become yet another challenge for NATO. It's a new type of warfare born out of the tremendous developments in technology of the last three decades, and it comes in the form of cyber security – a huge sphere that NATO was not ready to face. As a consequence, it had to transform and – as a matter of fact – it is still under construction, in order to be always at least a number of steps ahead of our enemies.

The problem is that cyber security threats are being created both by state and non-state actors. So, very often, this warfare is one of asymmetry, but it has potential to undermine the very fabric of our societies. The

existential threat, however, comes from new, powerful cyber armies set up, trained, and maintained by the West's systemic rivals, namely, Russia and China. The European Union, including Poland, is under constant cyber attack, the target being our critical infrastructure; airports, data bases, private firms, and all the country's information systems (KPMG, 2022).

In fact, the world has entered an era of information-based warfare wherein information itself has became a battlefield. Misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and deep fakes – to name just the most familiar phenomena – have become a powerful tool in the hands of illiberal states. It's worth noting that some of them have already started using new, powerful technology to assume much tighter control over their own societies. The very targets of information warfare range all the way from local citizens to foreign nations. In this sense, modern technology has enabled a new, Orwellian style of totalitarianism, until recently, only known from and found in science-fiction films and literature.

Large farms of Russian trolls creating millions of fake accounts on the most popular social media including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram along with video-sharing platforms have become a totally new phenomenon and a powerful tool of influence over liberal democracies and are used to manipulate their societies. The Covid-19 pandemic and now the war in Ukraine have both shown that these fake accounts are highly effective as evidenced by the sheer amount of opinions pumped into cyber space by their malicious actors. Paradoxically, the freedom of the media and freedom of speech so cherished by the West – and absent in authoritarian regimes – have become weapons employed against these fundamental liberties of the free world (Gov.UK, 2022).

The European Union and NATO Member States have also not been immune to those threats. In fact, our societies are struggling to fend off disinformation. Efforts made by European institutions, governments, and civil societies themselves have not been enough to eliminate the rapid spread of malicious Kremlin propaganda. This proves true particularly in those Member States whose governments have not been wholeheartedly supporting the Ukrainian fight for survival. One such example is Hungary, where – thanks to false narrative – much of the population believe that the war in Ukraine is the fault of the West. It demonstrates how very vulnerable the liberal nations of Europe really are (Vaski, 2022).

We, as the West, are constantly under attack; our societies, free media, our thinking, and most of the time, our democratic values (Bryjka, 2022). If we genuinely wish to protect these entities against the intrusions of new, cyber totalitarianism, we need to build the capacity to not only be aware that it is happening, but also to counter it. As is

commonly known, algorithms can be used not only to harm others, but to defend ourselves as well. This is what is actually happening. NATO, a number of European institutions (including EUvsDisinfo), individual states, and private companies – including news agencies – are all trying to uncover disinformation as well as find and neutralise troll farms that produce it.

There are, however, some critical caveats in this respect. The actual fight against disinformation starts with education, this being the only feasible way of defeating false information. NATO, the EU, and individual Member States are already active in this field, but the real effort needs to be made in schools. Here, central and local governments must cooperate to implement smart-media-literacy curricula at all levels. While certain progress can currently be observed, we are rather at the beginning of the whole process.

Concluding Remarks – The Future of Security Architecture in Europe

However absurd it may sound, it was Russian President Vladimir Putin who helped the West to integrate more and provided NATO again with a clear and indisputable *raison d'etre* at the international stage. It was just few years ago, in 2019, when French President Emmanuel Macron warned the West that, "What we are currently experiencing is the brain death of NATO" and that Europe cannot longer rely on America to defend NATO allies (The Economist, 2019). That statement came after, in January 2017, Donald Trump – the then US President elect – had declared that NATO was "(…) obsolete because it wasn't taking care of terror", and that "a lot of countries" aren't paying "what they're supposed to be paying" which, in Trump's view, was very unfair to the United States (Reuters, 2017).

From a 2022 perspective, it was a different era in the turbulent history of the West. Since then, much has changed, and, meanwhile, Germany – the nation that was "stigmatised" by President Trump as the most stubborn non-payer of the required 2 percent of GDP for defence (Reuters, 2018) – has undergone a dramatic shift in this respect. The new German chancellor, Olaf Scholz calls it a *Zeitenwende* – a "turning point" in the country's history (Scholz, 2022). Just after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, he announced sweeping changes to the country's defence spending aimed at beefing up the Bundeswehr with 100bn euros from 2022's military budget. Chancellor Scholz also pledged to reach the required 2 percent of GDP to be allocated for military expenditure that is demanded by NATO (Reuters, 2022).

Challenged by the aggressive Putin regime in Moscow, the North Atlantic Alliance becomes stronger and more robust – contrary to the Kremlin's expectations. However, what does it mean for the Balkans? By now, most – but not all – Balkan countries are NATO members. Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia are, however, still not part of the alliance for various domestic and strategic reasons. On the other hand, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Slovenia, Croatia – all of these nations have joined NATO, even if they are occasionally threatened by Moscow, as was the case for Montenegro. The very pattern already practiced by Poland and other Visegrad countries is repeating itself in the Balkans. EU accession is preceded by NATO membership that serves as a platform for communication with and within the Balkan nations.

Meanwhile, the full integration into NATO of those who are still not members is a major challenge. In times of war, enlargement is much more difficult for such nations as Ukraine or Georgia. But, at the same time, the Alliance was approached by those Scandinavian countries that have, so far, been neutral. Finland and Sweden have applied for NATO membership, meaning that this is another angle of the same process of the rapid transformation of Europe's security architecture. In times of peace, these developments would not have been possible as Stockholm and Helsinki had stayed (as, for decades, did Finland), or preferred and wanted to stay outside of the NATO security system.

However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine prompted them to change their minds and apply for accession (NATO, 2022a). Their NATO membership is set to strongly influence the European security architecture's set-up, with particular regard to the Alliance's eastern flank. With Sweden and Finland on board, the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad has become less dangerous, whereas – on the other hand – the Russian strategic position around the vital Sankt Petersburg metropolis has become much more precarious. Thanks to Vladimir Putin's misguided thinking and actions, NATO has become stronger. There are only 4 countries of the EU who are still – for historical and geostrategic reasons – not members of the Pact; Austria, Malta, Cyprus, and Ireland. It remains to be seen whether they will join the Alliance or not.

Both for NATO as well as for the European project, the last but, perhaps, key element which is missing is trust. There are hesitations among the Balkan nations (NATO, 2022c), and there are concerns, too; politics are being played by some NATO members against each other, as in case of Turkey, Cyprus, and Greece (Stergiou, 2022). Finally, Europeans have doubts about the Americans' scale of engagement in the region in the future, as the USA has become extremely polarised, and society

hesitates when US troops are sent to war. For Europe, trust among the allies remains a huge challenge, yet is the very key to NATO's success a security provider. It is also crucial for the future of the Balkans.

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The Balance of Poland's Participation in the European Union's Development Policy

Abstract
Poland's accession to the European Union entailed the need to align Polish development policy with the policy pursued by the European Union. It became a stimulus for the advancement of Polish development cooperation in the practical as well as the institutional dimension. Poland has undergone a transformation from a recipient country into a donor country. Changes that occurred in Poland under the impact of the EU's development policy, along with the growing expenditure on ODA, have undoubtedly contributed to Poland's prestige surge on the international arena. The chapter highlights how Poland's development cooperation policy was affected by its participation in the EU development policy and aims to answer questions pertaining to what consequences arise for Poland from participating in the EU development policy? Is Poland sufficiently involved in the EU development policy? Is Polish development cooperation complementary to EU policy?

Keywords: Polish Aid, Official Development Assistance, European Union, Development Policy, Sustainable Development Goals

Introduction

Poland's accession to the European Union meant joining the largest institutional donor of Official Development Assistance (ODA) in the world. This created not only opportunities related to the growing importance of Poland in the international arena, but also entailed the need to align Polish development policy with the policy pursued in this area by the European Union. It resulted from the duality characterising the development cooperation policy (commonly referred to as development policy) consisting in the division of competences between the European

Union and its Member States, which in practice means that the EU and the Member States can legislate and enact binding acts in this area. Therefore, since the adoption of the Treaty of Lisbon, the policies of the EU and the Member States in development cooperation must complement and reinforce one another, and the exercise of the EU's competences in terms of development cooperation cannot prevent Member States from exercising their competences (*Treaty of Lisbon*, 2007). When analysing the content of the Treaty of Lisbon, it appears that it equated the actions of the European Union with the actions of states, which, compared to the provisions of the Maastricht Treaty, stipulating that the policy of the then Community is complementary to the policies implemented by the Member States, is in fact a significant increase for the EU's profile.

This chapter aims to highlight the impact of Poland's participation in the EU development policy on the Polish development cooperation policy. Although Poland cooperates with a number of international development organisations, the chapter deliberately disregards them due to the principal topic. Patryk Kugiel, Paweł Bagiński, Katarzyna Zalas-Kamińska and co-authors of reports on Polish development cooperation published by *inter alia* Grupa Zagranica have comprehensively written about Polish development policy. Of the many texts on Polish development cooperation, only one referred the impact of the European Union on Polish development cooperation policy, published in 2015 by Artur Wieczorek as part of the annual reports issued by Grupa Zagranica (Wieczorek, 2015). In this chapter, the author consciously limited the considerations to the impact of the EU on Polish development policy, attempting to answer questions such as: what consequences arise for Poland from the participation in the EU development policy? Is Poland sufficiently involved in the EU development policy? Is Polish development cooperation complementary to EU policy?

The chapter is divided into three parts. The first highlights the consequences of Poland's participation in the EU development policy, the second analyses the main activities of Polish development aid in accordance with the currently binding strategic document adopted on 19 January 2021 by the Council of Ministers, and the last one is an attempt to evaluate Poland's participation in the EU development policy. The selection of research methods applied in this chapter is characteristic of social sciences. Two main research methods were applied: source and descriptive. The first one was used to analyse and verify EU and Polish documents related to development cooperation policy while the observation method allowed for the collection of research material on Poland's participation in the EU development policy.

Consequences of Poland's Participation in the European Union's Development Policy

Poland's accession to the European Union necessitated the requirement to pursue Polish development cooperation with due regard for the goals and principles of the policy pursued by the EU in this area. The Maastricht and Lisbon Treaties, as well as the EU strategic documents on development provide guidelines to actions taken by both the Member States and the EU itself, in line with the idea of coherence and complementarity. Since Poland's accession to the EU, the package comprises, among others:

a. *European Consensus on Development* (20 December 2005),
b. *Increasing the Impact of EU Development Policy – an Agenda for Change* (13 October 2011),
c. *New European Consensus on Development* (7 June 2017).

Their assumptions give rise to the EU and its Member States taking into account international obligations in the field of development aid adopted at the forum of the United Nations and other competent organisations. In practice, this implies that the actions of the EU and individual Member States, including Poland, should be directed at combating poverty by implementing primarily the Millennium Development Goals defined for the years 2000–2015, and nowadays at achieving the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals defined by the United Nations for the years 2015–2030.

Placing EU development policy in the EU's External Actions under the Treaty of Lisbon meant that development aid became one of the instruments of the EU's external policy underpinned by the principles of democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, the principles of equality and solidarity, and respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law (*Treaty of Lisbon*, 2007, pp. 23–24). The effectiveness of the development aid itself was to be ensured by the key principles of its delivery, as set out in the *Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness* (2005) signed by the European Commission and Member States, such as the principle of ownership, alignment, harmonisation, mutual accountability and managing for results that were slightly modified in the final documents from Busan (2011) and Nairobi (2016).[1]

Poland's participation in the EU development policy was also linked to the adoption of financial commitments concerning, first of all, obligatory

[1] The principles of development aid effectiveness relate nowadays to: ownership, focus on results, inclusive development partnership, as well as transparency and mutual accountability.

contributions to the EU general budget, which is the source of funds for development policy at the disposal of the European Commission. In the years 2004–2021, Poland paid over 68.6 billion euros to the EU budget, including reimbursements and a membership payment (Serwis Programu Inteligentny Rozwój, 2022). Poland's contributions to the general budget in relation to the EU budget allocated to official development aid will amount to 481 million euros in 2022. Secondly, Poland pledged to contribute to the European Development Fund (EDF) financing development aid for African, and Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries. Poland has been contributing to the EDF since its 10th edition scheduled for the years 2008–2013 by paying a contribution of 294.8 million euros, which, in the 11th edition (2014–2020), was increased to 612.3 million euros (European Communities, 2006, European Commission, 2013). Since 2021, the EDF has been incorporated with the EU budget and integrated into the main EU financial tool supporting development in partner countries, i.e., the Global Europe: Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument, with 79.5 billion euros for 2021–2027. Poland's contribution to the EDF in 2022 (including contributions to the European Commission and the European Investment Bank) will amount to 56.2 million euros. Finally, as an EU member, Poland also contributes to the EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey, which finances humanitarian aid, health care and socio-economic support. In the first tranche for 2016–2017, amounting to 3 billion euros, Poland's contribution was 57 million euros. In the second tranche for 2019–2023, Poland decided to contribute 29.9 million euros (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022, pp. 37–38).

The consequence arising from Poland joining the world's largest ODA donor was the increase in the financial commitment of the Polish authorities to ODA objectives. Binding arrangements in this regard were made at the European Council meetings in 2005 and 2015 in connection with respectively the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals and currently the Sustainable Development Goals. For the countries that joined the EU after 2002, the obligations from 2005 applied to the achievement of an ODA level of 0.17% of GNI by 2010 and efforts to increase ODA to 0.33% of GNI by 2015. Arrangements adopted in 2015 confirmed in the case of Poland (and other countries that joined the EU after 2002) the commitment to increase expenditure on ODA objectives to the level of 0.33% of GNI. The EU's collective commitment is to meet the target of 0.7% of GNI to ODA during the course of the programme following 2015 (Council of the European Union, 2005; 2015).

The complementarity of the EU and individual Member States' development policy entails, in a sense, consequences of selecting

beneficiary countries of Polish development aid. In the 2005 *Consensus on Development*, the EU underlined the need to prioritise LDCs and other low-income countries, and to include assistance for middle-income (especially lower-middle-income, as calculated by the World Bank) and fragile states. The EU presented practically a similar approach in the *New European Consensus on Development* from 2017, even though, in that document, the EU announced that it would differentiate development aid depending on the capabilities and needs of developing countries. This will mean a further concentration of resources on the poorest countries and, at the same time, an expansion of collaboration with more advanced developing countries exceeding the framework of financial cooperation in the form of dialogue, technical cooperation, and knowledge sharing (*New European Consensus*, 2017, pp. 19–20). The prioritisation of LDCs, fragile and conflict-affected countries is also reflected in the ODA commitments, since the EU agreed to jointly contribute 0.15–0.20% of GNI to ODA for LCDs, and ultimately 0.20% of GNI during the implementation of action programmes after 2015 (Council of the European Union, 2015, p. 12).

Finally, a significant consequence for Poland arising from its participation in the EU development policy is the obligation to take into consideration the policy coherence for development, which necessitates the incorporation of development goals in other policies pursued by Poland that may affect developing countries and the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, e.g., in terms of trade, agriculture, environmental protection, food security, and migration. This should force the Polish authorities and the entire government administration to plan reforms in individual state policies in such a way as to account for the Sustainable Development Goals at all levels.

Poland's inclusion in the EU development policy was also connected with the requirement to create its own national system of development cooperation. Its legislative core is the *Development Cooperation Act* as of 16 September 2011, adopted relatively late in relation to Poland's accession to the EU. Until its implementation, Polish aid was based on the *Polish Development Cooperation Strategy* as of October 2003 adopted by the Council of Ministers and the annual operational plans of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), which, since 2008, are entitled *Polish Development Aid Programme Provided via the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland* (Kugiel, 2010, p. 254). The foregoing Act introduced the principle of pursuing development cooperation on the basis of programmes prepared for a period of not less than 4 years, which resulted in the *Multiannual Programmes for Development Cooperation* (2012–2015 and 2016–2020), which in turn laid the foundations for the development of annual plans

announced by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The institutional pillar of the Polish development cooperation system is the Development Cooperation Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs established in 2005, which also supports the activities of the National Coordinator of Development Cooperation and the Development Cooperation Policy Council.

The Concept of Polish Development Cooperation for 2021–2030

Polish development cooperation, also referred to as "Polish Aid", encompasses three elements: development assistance, humanitarian aid, and global education. They constitute mutually complementary activities contributing to the eradication of poverty and the pursuit of more sustainable development, and the document currently defining the concept of Polish aid is entitled *Solidarity for Development*. The *Multiannual Programme for Development Cooperation for 2021–2030* symbolises the commitment to support the development needs of less developed countries. It is the first document adopted for a period longer than 4 years, suggesting its connection with the implementation of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* which sets out actions for development at the global level and is also a reference point for actions taken by the European Union.

The document clearly specified which Sustainable Development Goals are of key importance for Polish development cooperation. These include, listed in the following order:

Goal 16. Peace, justice and strong institutions;

Goal 4. Quality education;

Goal 8. Decent work and economic growth;

Goal 10. Reduced inequalities;

Goal 3. Good health and well-being;

Goal 6. Clean water and sanitation;

Goal 11. Sustainable cities and communities;

Goal 13. Climate action, which, along with gender equality, has been included in the catalogue of cross-cutting priorities (Website of the Republic of Poland, n.d., p. 7).

In the current programme, compared to the previous multiannual programmes for development cooperation, priority countries for Polish aid have not been explicitly mentioned. The only information in this regard is that Poland will focus on a maximum of 10 countries, including selected countries from the Eastern Partnership and the Middle East, North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa region that are on the list of ODA

recipients devised by the OECD Development Assistance Committee. Pursuant to the annual Development Cooperation Plans (2021, 2022), the following countries were selected priorities for Poland: Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine (Eastern Partnership), Ethiopia, Kenya, Senegal, Tanzania (Sub-Saharan Africa) as well as Lebanon and Palestine (Middle East). The list will be reviewed in 2024 and 2027. The selection criteria for the aforesaid countries, apart from the obvious issues, i.e.: the state and prospects of political and economic relations with a given country, the objectives of Poland's foreign policy, the safety of personnel involved in providing aid, included such criteria as consistency with the activities of the European Union and other international organisations to which Poland belongs (Ministry of the Foreign Affairs, N.D. a, pp. 14–15).

An innovative solution proposed in the current programme is the announcement of the establishment of an executive agency implementing the government's policy pertaining to development aid, employing not only existing forms of assistance, but also implementing modern tools in respect of international cooperation. Despite numerous advantages and disadvantages of both the ministerial model and the agency model, the establishment of the announced agency could contribute to greater recognition of "Polish Aid" activities (Korowajczyk-Sujkowska, 2019, p. 27). The concept of Polish development cooperation for the years 2021–2030 also provides for broad partnership with domestic and foreign entities, however, placing a lot of emphasis on the inclusion of the private sector and non-governmental organisations in assistance activities due to their key importance in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

Humanitarian aid and global education, despite being of different character than development aid, were included in the *Multiannual Programme for Development Cooperation for 2021–2030*, because, as mentioned above, Polish development cooperation is referred to as "Polish Aid". Due to the prolonged crises, contemporary humanitarian aid incorporates not only *ad hoc* measures contributing to saving and protecting lives and health, but also aid that should be combined with activities for sustainable development, conflict prevention as well as peace building and keeping, in accordance with the "Triple Nexus" (Humanitarian-Development-Peace) concept. The provision of humanitarian aid will not be linked to geographically-defined priority areas.

Global education has been included in the current programme as one of the elements contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. The main emphasis will be on explaining to the public the need to implement the 2030 Agenda, the essence of the main global problems, as well as reducing stereotypes about the countries of the

Global South and including citizens in voluntary assistance in developing countries. The creation of a strategic and operational document on global education in Poland was also announced (Ministry of the Foreign Affairs, n.d. a, p. 26).

An Attempt to Evaluate Polish Development Cooperation Pursued Within the European Union

The first thing that comes to mind when trying to evaluate development cooperation is the amount of financial aid provided to developing countries. In 2004, Poland's ODA amounted to 95 million euros, which accounted for 0.05% of GNI. In 2020, Poland's ODA was 728 million euros, which accounted for 0.14% of GNI. Preliminary data for 2021 shows that this value increased to 805 million euros, which is 0.15% of GNI (European Commission, 2022). The increase in ODA is the result of a surge in bilateral aid, including COVID-19 related assistance and vaccine donation (OECD-Paris, 2022). Even though Poland has made great progress in increasing expenditure on development aid since 2004, we are currently still 991 million euros (0.18% of GNI) short of fulfilling a commitment to reach the level of 0.33% of GNI. Compared to other European Union Member States, our contribution does not look that great as we are eighth from the end, *ex aequo* with Croatia, taking into account the value of ODA as a percentage of GNI. Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Greece, Lithuania, Latvia, Romania, and Slovakia spend less than 0.15% of GNI on development aid.[2] The only comforting thing is that of all EU countries, only five have fulfilled their financial commitments by reaching ODA of at least 0.70% of GNI (Denmark, Germany)) or more (Luxemburg 0.99% of GNI, Sweden 0.92% GNI) and 0.33% of GNI (Malta), and a number of rich Member States such as, for instance, Austria, Belgium, Finland, Italy or Spain generated a much larger financing gap than Poland in meeting ODA commitments.

Poland has also failed to fulfil its commitment to finance development aid for LDCs. In 2020, it amounted to 114 million euros (0.02% of GNI), which is a merely a token amount from the viewpoint of the least developed countries and their needs (European Commission, 2022). The fact that only five EU Member States meet the financial commitments assumed for LDCs should not be an excuse for Poland because, according to EU

[2] The calculations do not account for Cyprus since it failed to provide ODA data and therefore no results for Cyprus were published. However, taking into consideration the data for 2020, Cyprus qualifies well below the set target, achieving ODA of 0.06% of GNI.

philosophy, LDCs as well as the fragile and conflict-affected countries are to be at the forefront of aid activities. What is more, the current ten priority countries of "Polish Aid" include only two LDCs, which slightly distances Poland from the arrangements adopted by the EU in the *New European Consensus on Development.* Poland, however, through greater involvement in assistance for LDCs, could improve its image in the EU development cooperation policy and become the leader of the countries that joined the EU after 2002 in supporting the development of LDCs.

If the measure of evaluation was Poland's activity within EU activities in the field of development cooperation, then its evaluation would not be great either. The latest example is the COVID-19 pandemic during which Poland did not actively support the EU's global response to the pandemic. Even though Poland eventually, like all EU Member States, financially supported the idea of raising funds to combat the virus, it was not "visible" during the "Global Response Summit" (4 May 2020) nor during the Global Pledging Summit (27 June 2020). Poland's donation amounted to 89.63 million euros, of which 0.75 million euros was Poland's contribution to the V4 Group "vaccine fund", 12.21 million euros were funds provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs supporting mainly countries from the Eastern Partnership, Africa, and the Middle East, and 76.67 million euros were declared by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education to support coronavirus research conducted by Polish enterprises and scientific entities.[3]

Poland is part of the Team Europe initiative combining the financial resources of all EU Member States and their executing organisations as well as institutions financing development, the European Commission, the European Investment Bank, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, providing partner countries with assistance in response to humanitarian needs caused by the pandemic, strengthening health systems, and mitigating the socio-economic effects. The idea of Team Europe was an *ad hoc* response to COVID-19, and now has a chance to become a permanent "brand" of EU development policy. Team Europe is already operating under its own name *Team Europe Initiatives* (TEIs) that constitute development flagship projects implemented by European partners with a national, regional and multinational dimension. They are closely related to the idea of "joint programming" promoted by the EU in order to increase resources and influence partner countries. Team Europe aims to assume a leading role in the international arena, to protect the interests and promote the values of the European Union. Team

[3] Data obtained from the Department of Development Cooperation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Europe also entails a *branding* of the EU intervention and increasing its visibility (European Commission, 2021, p. 13). Therefore, Poland should definitely become more involved in the implementation of TEIs, using Team Europe to increase its visibility in terms of development policy and strengthen its international position. Our presence is currently insignificant and limited to participation in one multinational initiative (Team Europe Democracy), two regional initiatives (Health in the Eastern Neighbourhood; Manufacturing and Access to Vaccines, Medicines and Health Technology Products in Africa) and two implemented at a national level, but for one country, i.e., Morocco (Morocco-gender equality; Morocco-post crisis recovery). Compared to all Team Europe members, Poland's share in regional initiatives amounts to 7.4%, in national initiatives 1.6%, and is definitely lower than the corresponding results for the most active state members of Team Europe, such as France (88.9% and 75% respectively), Germany (77.8% and 68%), and Spain (63% and 43.8%). EU countries that produced a worse outcome than Poland in terms of TEIs participation are as follows: Slovenia, Greece, Lithuania, Cyprus, Malta, Romania, Slovakia, and Croatia. Our result is slightly better when we take into account the number of countries covered by joint programming. For Poland, the number of countries covered is 9, which accounts for 19.1% of the countries covered by joint programming and places us twelfth among the Member States (Capacity4dev, N.D.). Nevertheless, the above data clearly highlight that in the near future, Poland should treat participation in TEIs as a challenge and an opportunity to increase its presence in the EU development policy. Poland should more frequently initiate projects such as the one which allowed it to become the coordinator of the EU Team Europe project, aiming at the distribution of vaccines to the Eastern Partnership countries. The project implemented jointly by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego acting as an executive partner of the European Commission was undoubtedly a brilliant step towards strengthening cooperation with the European Union and consolidating the country's position in the international arena (BGK, 2021).

What is more, Poland does not make excessive use of EU humanitarian aid mechanisms. Although humanitarian aid in EU policy is a separate form of External Action, today the EU and its Member States treat humanitarian activities and development cooperation in a coherent and complementary manner. The COVID-19 pandemic has proven that *ad hoc* measures will affect the reconstruction and development of poorer countries, and therefore must complement each other. Poland used the European Civil Protection Mechanism only once, during the pandemic,

to transfer 300,000 doses of vaccines for Rwanda (19 November 2021), even though the vaccines from Poland were forwarded, in the form of a donation or resale, to countries such as: Cambodia, Laos, Bangladesh, Georgia, Vietnam, Kyrgyzstan, Egypt, and Taiwan. In the case of other humanitarian crises affecting the European Union, i.e., the 2015 migration crisis and the refugee crisis caused by Russia's aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, Poland adopted completely different approaches. This is obviously due to the close connection between broadly understood international aid and the state's foreign policy. While during the first crisis, Poland expressed no willingness to help, during the latter, however, Poland adopted an explicit position, accepting the largest number of refugees (1.3 million) of all EU countries and organising a wide-ranging humanitarian aid operation with the support of non-governmental organisations and Polish society. An excellent idea was the Polish-Swedish initiative to organise the International Donors' Conference for Ukraine, held in Poland on 5 May 2022, during which 6.5 billion dollars was pledged to meet the most urgent humanitarian needs related to the Ukrainian crisis. Its form resembled the summits co-organised by the European Commission during the pandemic in order to raise funds to combat the virus. The Conference brought together 21 heads of state and government, humanitarian organisations, along with financial institutions and global businesses. The Conference was attended, among others, by: the President of the European Council, the President of the European Commission, the Deputy Secretary General of the United Nations and the head of UN OCHA, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the Executive Director of the World Food Program (WFP), the Executive Director of UNICEF, the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, as well as Secretary General of the OSCE, the Secretary General of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the President of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the President of the European Investment Bank (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). Thanks to such initiatives, Poland improved its image as a country providing help to refugees and, at the same time, using EU and international institutions, generated funds necessary to provide aid.

Poland is now doing much better in implementing the idea of "Policy Coherence for Development" (PCD). Poland referred to PCD more broadly for the first time in the Multiannual Programme for Development Cooperation for 2016-2020, treating it as one of the principles of development cooperation alongside other principles such as efficiency, transparency, and joint programming. At the same time, PCD priority areas were defined, i.e., support for activities to fight illicit financial

flows in such areas as: combating tax evasion and money laundering (the Ministry of Finance being the leading institution) and the dissemination and implementation of corporate social responsibility standards in the context of PCD (the Ministry of Development being the leading institution) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016–2020, p. 56). In the current programme for 2021–2030, the idea of policy coherence for development was presented in relation to the broader concept presented by the OECD, i.e., policy coherence for sustainable development. Nevertheless, there is one priority, namely, focusing all efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. In 2021, it was supplemented with combating the illicit trade in endangered species of fauna and flora (the Ministry of Climate and Environment being the leading institution) under two new priority areas: sustainable cities and communities, as well as climate action (including environment and the seas) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021, p. 17). What is more, Poland introduced PCD to its impact assessment procedure, which was positively evaluated by the European Commission. In the guidelines for the regulation impact assessment, a question was introduced regarding the possible impact of a given regulation on the socio-economic development of priority countries for Poland. This allows one to assess the potential impact of a given national policy on the socio-economic development in priority countries for "Polish Aid" (Council of the European Union, 2019, p. 16).

Poland has been successful at consolidating the national development cooperation programme with the EU development policy strategy. The current programme for 2021–2030, which clearly refers to the key Sustainable Development Goals in all EU activities, highlights the country's achievements in this regard quite well. Convergent with the EU vision are not only actions related to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, but also emphasising the role of climate action, equality between women and men, as well as strengthening the social position of women and girls. The selection of priority countries from LDCs and countries with an average level of development, as well as establishing the principles of development cooperation and its guiding values, has also been in line with the EU strategy. Poland also declared its efforts to increase the EU's effectiveness in development cooperation through active participation in the process of planning individual development cooperation strategies in partner countries and in the process of monitoring the implementation of their goals. Humanitarian policy, as highlighted above, constitutes a separate area of the EU's External Action, while in the Polish development cooperation programme it is an integral part of "Polish Aid". The programme for the period 2021–2030, also in

this respect, fits perfectly into the EU's philosophy, which sees the need to combine humanitarian aid with long-term development, due to the complexity of the humanitarian crises and their protraction. The effective development cooperation programme proves that Poland's participation in the EU development policy has been a fundamental impulse for the establishment of a modern development aid concept in Poland in line with the concept of the largest ODA donor in the world.

Conclusions

Poland's accession to the EU became a stimulus for the advancement of Polish development cooperation in the practical as well as the institutional dimension. Poland has undergone a transformation from a recipient country into a donor country. Changes that occurred in Poland under the influence of the EU's development policy, along with the growing expenditure on ODA, undoubtedly contributed to Poland's prestige surge in the international arena, which culminated in Poland's inclusion to the DAC committee within the OECD that for Poland, as Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Paweł Jabłoński stated, was "a sign of excellence and quality" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021).

The division of competences between the EU and Member States in the field of development cooperation does not curb Polish policy. It is, in fact, to the contrary, it aligns it with international standards and principles. With each multiannual programme for development cooperation and annual strategic plans, we can see how "Polish Aid", at least conceptually, is drawing closer to EU strategy. We are, however, slightly less successful in meeting financial commitments in terms of the level of ODA and the level of activity within the framework of initiatives undertaken by the European Commission. Insignificant financial resources allocated to ODA, compared to the largest EU donors, do not have to sideline us. In the forthcoming years, Poland should be regarded to a greater extent as a country that supports various initiatives of the European Commission, and today it can be done best through the mechanism of joint Team Europe initiatives.

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The Systemic Transformation in Poland – Determinants and Limitations

Abstract
The article discusses the systemic evolution of the Polish state after 1989 through the prism of constitutional changes and the principle of political pluralism. Two main research methods used in political science analyses – the legal-institutional method and the historical-descriptive method – were applied. The main question of the conducted research relates to the identification of the key organ of state power under the adopted constitutional models. It was considered whether, and to what extent, Polish solutions represent a reception of regulations in consolidated democracies. At the same time, the crucial points of contention in the constitutional debate in the discussed period were highlighted.

Keywords: Constitution, State System, Democratisation, Transformation, Poland, Political Pluralism, System of Government

Introduction

The process of fundamental political and constitutional changes began in Poland at the beginning of 1989 with the decision of the highest authorities of the communist party (PZPR) to start talks with representatives of a part of the political opposition centered around Lech Wałęsa and the illegal (at the time) structures of "Solidarity". As a direct consequence of the agreement to discuss the necessary changes in the political system and – to a lesser extent – in the social and economic system, the "round table" talks were inaugurated with the participation of representatives of both the coalition government side (politicians from PZPR and its two allied fractions – ZSL and SD) and the opposition Solidarity side. Almost two months of talks resulted in an agreement to re-legalise Solidarity (both the workers' and farmers' branches), to allow

competitive elections to the Sejm (though the ruling party was assured of 65% of seats in the upcoming term), and to reactivate traditional Polish political institutions abolished under the communist rule – the Senate (the second chamber of parliament) and the President. There was also agreement on political and trade union pluralism, reduced censorship and increased freedom in public life. Early elections to both chambers of parliament were called for 4 and 18 June 1989. They were scheduled to be held in two rounds, as majority voting was then used (Trembicka, 2003; Dudek, 2004; Dubiński, 1999). A researcher of Poland's recent history pointed to the international and geopolitical aspect of the processes initiated: "the significance of the Round Table talks was most quickly recognised by the US Embassy in Warsaw. On 7 March 1989, Ambassador John R. Davis informed the State Department: 'Communism is turning into something Jaruzelski described as democratic neo-socialism, an idea that seems to have more in common with contemporary Sweden than Stalinist Russia'. He concluded that Solidarity had gained much more than it had originally intended" (Sowa, 2011).

Constitutional Change of 1989

The most significant changes were those made to the structure of the supreme organs of state power. These meant that the existing July 1952 Constitution of the People's Republic of Poland had to be amended. The changes in question were introduced under the so-called April Amendment – at a session of the Sejm on 7 April 1989. (Sejm of the Republic of Poland, 1989a) It is worth stressing that the amendment did not yet establish a fully democratic political system or a clearly oriented parliamentary system. The outcome of the changes was a hybrid system which retained the principle of unity of state power with the supreme, albeit weakened, constitutional position of the Sejm of the People's Republic of Poland. A new feature were regulations taken from the constitutional law of Finland and the Fifth Republic of France relating to the institution of the President of the People's Republic of Poland, which can be described as the introduction of certain elements of the presidential system in Poland (similar to the April Constitution of 1935) (Garlicki, 2018; Gebethner, 2022; Moldawa, 1999).

The April Amendment changed the wording of 26 articles in six of the eleven chapters of the constitution, repealed two other articles and added nine new ones. It also introduced into the constitution a new chapter defining the status of the office of President, who was to ensure that the constitution, the country's sovereignty, security, inviolability and

indivisibility were safeguarded, and that interstate political and military alliances were adhered to (this provision referred to the Warsaw Pact and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance), which was intended to guarantee that Poland's existing political system would be maintained. The President was to be elected for a maximum of two six-year terms by the National Assembly; similar provisions were stipulated in the inter-war March Constitution of 1921. In the event of the President's inability to carry out their duties or if the office became vacant, the President would be replaced by the Speaker of the Sejm (who thus became the second most important person in the country). The institution of the President was criticised – which should be emphasised at this point of our politological deliberations – by some in the party apparatus as incompatible with the assumptions of the socialist system, but the April Amendment did not result in an evolution towards a presidential or semi-presidential system (Garlicki, 2018; Ajnenkiel, 2001).

In addition to the office of the President of the People's Republic of Poland that replaced the previous collegial State Council, the amendment restored the institution of the Senate with the right to propose amendments to laws and the right of legislative initiative. It also established the National Council of the Judiciary as the body competent to propose judicial appointments. The role of the Senate was limited to legislative initiative and the right to propose amendments to laws passed by the Sejm. Combined sessions of the Sejm and Senate as the National Assembly were convened only in a few cases specified in detail in the constitutional regulation – 1) to elect the President, 2) to accept their oath, 3) to put them before the State Tribunal, or 4) to declare them incapable of holding office (Ciapala, 1999; Mojak, 1994; Sarnecki, 2000).

The April Amendment also referred to the status of the Constitutional Tribunal, the State Tribunal, the Council of Ministers, the Prime Minister, ministers, national councils, the Supreme Chamber of Control, the Prosecutor General and the armed forces, and it also constitutionalised the offices of the Ombudsman and the President of the National Bank of Poland. Some changes concerned the appointment and dismissal of the Council of Ministers and its members, the imposition of states of emergency and ratification of international agreements, and special attention was given to increasing the independence of the courts and judges (with the establishment of the National Council of the Judiciary for this purpose) (Garlicki, 2018; Sarnecki, 2014).

The first competitive elections since 1945 were a major political event in 1989. Three types of political entities competed for seats – 1) the existing political factions centered around the Polish United Workers'

Party (PZPR) and its two allied parties (ZSL and SD); 2) candidates put forward by the "Solidarity" Citizens' Committee led by Lech Wałęsa; and 3) candidates of other political organisations, e.g. the Labour Party, a Christian Democratic faction, the Confederation of Independent Poland or the libertarian Union of Real Politics. The candidates of the Citizens' Committee received the most votes, winning 99 out of 100 senatorial seats and 161 seats in the Sejm (out of a total of 161 freely contested). The incumbent government coalition, in turn, secured 299 seats (out of a total of 460 in the lower parliamentary chamber), but for the first time since 1944, the communist party (PZPR) did not hold a majority of seats on its own. Not all MPs of the incumbent coalition (from both PZPR, ZSL and SD) expressed a willingness to vote for the continuation of the existing power arrangement – symbolised both by the office of the President and the composition of the incoming Council of Ministers. This opened up opportunities for politicians of the opposition centered around the "Solidarity" Citizens' Committee and Lech Wałęsa (Codogni, 2012; Dudek, 2013; Piasecki, 2012; Raciborski, 1997). A researcher of the electoral campaign and the June 1989 election itself emphasised: "the June 1989 elections broke with the PRL electoral tradition and became a watershed moment for the process of systemic transformation. As such, they took on a meaning that was very distant from the one commonly ascribed to this act, namely that of a process where voters designate representatives to make decisions on their behalf. They clearly went beyond the function ascribed to them as they initiated a change in the order established at the Round Table and an unexpected acceleration of systemic reforms" (Codogni, 2012).

A key political event, pivotal for Poland's further socio-political development, was the formation of a new government coalition centered around MPs from the Civic Parliamentary Club (MPs elected from the Citizens' Committee list and recommended by Lech Wałęsa) and two parties previously affiliated with the PZPR – the United Peasant Party and the Democratic Party. Tadeusz Mazowiecki, a Catholic activist and advisor to Lech Wałęsa, became Prime Minister – the first non-communist head of government after 1944. In September 1989, the Sejm approved the new government, with most of the ministerial portfolios held by non-communist politicians. It was the first non-communist government in Central European countries since 1947. It initiated radical changes in the economic domain – the restoration of free market and capitalist institutions (symbolically called the Balcerowicz Plan), in the political and administrative domain – the formation of an apolitical state administration, changes in the military and police apparatus, and the

restitution of local government institutions (Mazowiecki, 2012; Dudek, 2019; Hall, 2011). As an insightful researcher of Poland's recent history aptly concluded: "The formation of the Mazowiecki government launched the process of systematic dismantling of the political system that existed in the People's Republic of Poland and the creation of a democratic state governed by the rule of law, the transformation of the economy into a market-based one, and the regaining of state sovereignty. It also rapidly accelerated the upheavals in Poland's western and southern neighbours, leading to the collapse of the entire 'real socialism' bloc within a matter of months" (Friszke, 2003).

At the same time, work began on drafting a new constitution for the country. A rather unusual situation arose as two constitutional committees were formed in both chambers of parliament (headed by Bronisław Geremek in the Sejm and by Alicja Grześkowiak from UMK in the Senate). Both committees prepared draft constitutional laws, the Sejm draft envisaged a more parliamentary system, while the Senate draft was leaning towards a presidential model. Eventually, in the spring of 1991, it was decided that the parliament elected in 1989 did not have the legitimacy (due to the fact that elections to the Sejm were not entirely free) to enact a new constitution of the independent Polish state (Chruściak, Osiatyński, 2001).

The second major amendment to the 1952 Constitution was passed in the Sejm on 29 December 1989, hence it was given the name December Amendment (Sejm of the Republic of Poland, 1989b). The December Amendment completely changed the wording of the first chapter of the constitution. At the same time, the name of the country was changed to the "Republic of Poland", which had been used until July 1952; also, ideological articles referring to the leading role of the party and friendship with the Soviet Union were removed. New constitutional principles of the Polish state were laid down, representing a kind of democratic constitutional catalogue – 1) the principle of a democratic state under the rule of law, 2) the principle of "social justice", 3) the principle of political pluralism, 4) freedom of economic activity, and 5) protection of property. The December Amendment also instituted symbolic changes, as reflected in such things as the restoration of the crown to the white eagle in the Polish coat of arms (for centuries a traditional symbol of the Polish state) (Garlicki, 2018; Witkowski, 2015; Górecki, 2015).

The third constitutional amendment was passed in the Sejm on 8 March 1990 and involved the restitution of local self-government (Sejm of the Republic of Poland, 1990a). Regulations concerning the system of national councils that had been in place since July 1944, modelled

on Soviet solutions, were repealed. The municipality was restored as a local government unit, with its own tasks and authorities elected by its inhabitants. The first local elections at the urban (city council) and rural (municipal council) municipal level were called for 27 May 1990 (Bartkowski et al., 2016; Kulesza, Regulski, 2009; Lutrzykowski, 2009).

The fourth amendment to the 1952 Constitution involved a change in the procedure for electing the President (Act of 27 September 1990). On 27 September 1990, the Sejm decided to introduce general presidential elections modelled on the French solutions in place since 1962. The President would be elected for a five-year term, with the right to be re-elected once, by the entire population with the right to vote for parliament. Candidates had to be Polish citizens over 35 years of age, with full political rights. A nomination of a candidate needed to be supported by at least 100,000 signatures of voters. The first presidential elections under this regulation were held on 25 November 1990 (Mojak, 1994; Ciapała, 1999). However, what is particularly noteworthy, the amendment was not coupled with a strengthening or consolidation of the position of the head of state in the existing structure of the supreme organs of state power, but quite the opposite – after 1992 the process of weakening the constitutional position of the President in relation to the Council of Ministers proceeded further.

Small Constitution of 1992

The Sejm of the first term, elected in the autumn of 1991, decided to appoint another constitutional committee, headed by Tadeusz Mazowiecki. It was recognised that, given the protracted work on a comprehensive draft of a new Polish constitution, it would be useful to draw on the Polish intermediate solutions involving the drafting and enactment of a so-called Small Constitution (just as the Sejm had done in February 1919, at the threshold of the Second Republic, and in February 1947, at the threshold of the post-war People's Republic of Poland). The content of the Small Constitution enacted in 1992 is described in a rather terse manner in the title of this legal act (Sejm of the Republic of Poland, 1992). It regulated the detailed organisation and functioning of the state organs with respect to both the legislative (the Sejm and the Senate) and executive (the President and the Council of Ministers) powers. It also contained, which was a novelty in comparison with Poland's previous Small Constitutions of 1919 and 1947, basic arrangements on local government (Kruk, 1993; Kallas, 1993).

The constitutional act was eventually passed by the Sejm at its session on 1 August 1992. It repealed the provisions of the 1952 Constitution

of the People's Republic of Poland concerning the socialist system and introduced new ones forming the foundation of the socio-political system and market economy that had been developing after the 1989 breakthrough. A new solution by the legislator was a reference to the principle of the tri-partition of power in line with the philosophy of the French thinker Montesquieu and the English philosopher Locke. The Small Constitution clearly stated that "the state organs with respect to legislative power are the Sejm and the Senate of the Republic of Poland, with respect to executive power – the President of the Republic of Poland and the Council of Ministers, with respect to judicial power – independent courts" (Sejm of the Republic of Poland, 1992). It also specified the President's prerogatives and introduced the principle of countersignature by the Prime Minister or a relevant minister for the President's official acts. The government – from the entry into force of the Small Constitution – was to be appointed by the President, but a vote of confidence in the Sejm was then required. The Council of Ministers was given the possibility of issuing – each time with the prior consent of the Sejm – regulations with the force of law. The President could shorten the parliament's term by dissolving the Sejm if the latter passed a vote of no confidence in the Prime Minister and failed to appoint a new government. The 1992 Constitutional Act also abolished the President's previous right to dissolve the parliament if the latter passed a law preventing the President from performing their duties (a regulation introduced in April 1989 for General Wojciech Jaruzelski) (Garlicki, 2018; Witkowski, 2015; Sarnecki, 2000).

A certain inconsistency of the authors of the constitutional regulations should be pointed out here. A new instrument was introduced to strengthen the position of the government in relation to the Sejm in the form of a constructive vote of no confidence in the Council of Ministers. But at the same time, MPs retained the possibility of tabling a simple motion without the name of a candidate for the next Prime Minister (Moldova, 2018; Kruk, 2019). The devised system of government was still best described as a hybrid one, as it included elements of a parliamentary system (the government's accountability to the Sejm), a presidential system (general elections, the right to give an opinion on candidates for heads of the so-called power ministries), and a chancellor system (the institution of a constructive vote of no confidence). There was a clear tendency to weaken the powers of the head of state outlined in the 1989 April Amendment in favour of the other branch of the executive – the government (Balaban, 2002; Szeliga, 1998). But we can also see a lot of inconsistencies and understatements in this process of change. Undoubtedly, Lech Wałęsa's style of performing the presidential duties –

hyperactive, pushing the political system apart, exploiting „loopholes in the law" – helped to steer the systemic evolution towards quasi-chancellor solutions (Nałęcz, 2017; Momro, 2019; Slomka, 2005).

Pluralistic Political Scene

An important process taking place on the Polish political scene involved the formation of its pluralistic appearance (for the first time since 1939). The institutional guarantor of political pluralism was the constitutional regulation of December 1989 proclaiming the freedom of formation and operation of political parties. It was further developed in the act on political parties, which was passed by the Polish parliament at a session on 28 July 1990 (Sejm of the Republic of Poland, 1990b). The act – the first of its kind in the Polish political system tradition – defined: 1) the structure and operating rules of political parties; 2) the rules of keeping records of political parties; 3) the rules of financing political parties; 4) the procedure to be followed in cases where the objectives or activities of political parties were found to be contrary to the Constitution; and 5) the rules for disbanding political parties. It was modelled on the fairly liberal German solutions from the 1967 federal law. The adopted model involved notification rather than registration (a register kept by the Voivodship Court in Warsaw) (Chmaj, 2006; Gorgol, Granat, Sobczak, 2000; Granat, Policastro, Sobczak, 2001).

Using the historical criterion, political parties emerging since the spring of 1989 could be classified as: 1) historical parties – which referred to factions operating in the past (e.g. in the period of the Second Republic of Poland or, more broadly, before the communist rule); 2) post-Solidarity factions – originating from the broad social and civic movement "Solidarity" and emerging since the autumn of 1989; 3) post-communist parties – which referred to factions existing in the period of the People's Republic of Poland and arose from their internal and, partly, policy transformations. The last group of parties was described in Polish political science as new, unrelated to the above-mentioned socio-political organisations, but reflecting new divisions in Polish society (Wojtaszczyk, 1998; Sobolewska-Myślik, 1999; Antoszewski, Herbut, Jednaka, 1993; Wojnicki, 2004).

Historical parties included the Polish Socialist Party, the Polish People's Party, the Labour Party and the National Democratic Party. All of these parties operated in interwar Poland, had their own MPs (some of them also senators), sat in the pre-May 1926 governments or in the exile governments in Paris and London after the outbreak of World War II.

The second group of political parties emerged from the decomposition of the so-called Solidarity Camp along policy and personal lines. In this context, we should mention the Christian National Union which pursued a synthesis of Christian Democratic and national thought (October 1989); the centrist Democratic Union formed by supporters of former Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki after the presidential elections (December 1990); the Centre Agreement conceived by Jarosław Kaczyński, a senator from Elbląg at the time (May 1990), and the Liberal Democratic Congress (comprising the so-called Gdańsk circle of economic liberals centered around Janusz Lewandowski and Donald Tusk). Post-communist parties included the Social Democracy of the Republic of Poland (SdRP), formed at the last congress of the PZPR in January 1990, with Aleksander Kwaśniewski and Leszek Miller. The Polish People's Party (PSL), created on the organisational and material basis of the United People's Party which operated during the period of the People's Republic of Poland (until November 1989) as the so-called allied or satellite party, was sometimes also included in this crop of parties. The last group of political organisations included Janusz Korwin-Mikke's Union of Real Politics, the Confederation of Independent Poland, which referred to Piłsudski's thought, and environmental factions (the Green Party) (Tomczak, Kowalczyk, 2007; Knyżewski, 1998; Gargas, Wojciechowski, 1991).

When analysing the process of the formation of a pluralistic political scene in Poland in the early 1990s, three issues should be noted. Firstly, the vast majority of new or transformed parties had top-down origins (predominantly parliamentary). In the first period, the parties originating from the communist-era system of power (SdRP or PSL) were the most numerous and the richest. Secondly, factions usually avoided calling themselves „parties", since it was commonly believed that this word was given a bad name by the PZPR, which had dominated for 41 years. Hence, the names of political factions included such designations as Union, Agreement, Confederation, Congress. And thirdly, new factions avoided describing themselves as left-wing, hence the popularity of centrist and centre-right definitions among parties. This trend could be seen until the second parliamentary elections in September 1993, incidentally won by centre-left parties (Kowalczyk, 2011; Chmaj, Sokół, Żmigrodzki, 1997).

Constitution of 1997

Another constitutional committee was established in the autumn of 1993 with the then leader of the SLD parliamentary club, Aleksander Kwasniewski, at its head. The commission managed to draft

a constitution within three years, relying on a constitutional coalition of four parliamentary factions – the Democratic Left Alliance, the Polish People's Party and two Unions – the Democratic Union and the Labour Union. Together, these parties held around 80% of the seats in the National Assembly following the September 1993 elections. It should be pointed out at this point in our political science analysis that the most important points of contention involved three issues: 1) the scope of the President's power and their position in the system of the supreme organs of state power; 2) the question of the place of the Roman Catholic Church in the country's social system and the definition of the type of State-Church relations; and 3) the definition of the scope of individual social and economic rights and the model of state economy (Garlicki, 2018; Chruściak, Osiatyński, 2001).

The core principles of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland include features typical of countries with a democratic system: 1) the principle of the sovereignty of the nation, 2) the principle of legalism, 3) the principle of subsidiarity, 4) the principle of a social market economy, 5) the principle of the republican form of the state (the name: Rzeczpospolita Polska – the Republic of Poland), 6) the principle of political representation, 7) the principle of a democratic state under the rule of law, 8) the principle of the division and balance of powers, 9) the principle of social pluralism, 10) the principle of sustainable development, 11) the principle of social justice, and 12) the principle of religious, ideological and philosophical impartiality of public authorities. They were included by the legislator in the first chapter – *the Republic* (Witkowski, 2015; Sarnecki, 2014; Winczorek, 2008).

The model of government adopted in the 1997 Constitution can be described as a parliamentary one with a stronger position of the government (and especially the Prime Minister as its head). The Prime Minister's position is bolstered by the introduction of political accountability of the Council of Ministers only in the form of a constructive vote of no confidence and by allowing the head of government to freely determine the number of ministries as branches of public administration. On the other hand, the Prime Minister's position is weakened by giving MPs the possibility to table a motion of no-confidence in individual ministers (unlike in the West German model referred to as the chancellor model). It should also be emphasised that the parliament has the exclusive right to enact laws (only during martial law can the President issue decrees with the force of law, subject to subsequent control by the Sejm). There is, however, a certain inconsistency in retaining the popular election of the head of state, in view of their weakened sovereign powers. The key

component of the executive power as stipulated by the Polish legislator is now the Council of Ministers, which "conducts the domestic and foreign policy of the Republic of Poland" (Article 146 of the Constitution). The main point of criticism from numerous academic circles concerns the lack of designation of the leading organ of state power, which raises the possibility of mutual "obstruction" between the organs of executive power (the President and the Council of Ministers). This process can be seen especially in periods of the so-called Cohabitation, i.e. when the heads of state and government come from divergent political camps (e.g. the presidency of Aleksander Kwaśniewski and the government led by Jerzy Buzek (1987–2001), or the presidency of Lech Kaczyński and the Council of Ministers led by Donald Tusk in 2007–2010) (Garlicki, 2018; Witkowski, 2015; Banaszak, 2015).

Conclusions

To conclude our deliberations, it should be emphasised that the systemic transformation in Poland after 1989 (the year commonly regarded as the beginning of changes and a watershed moment) unfolded in three major stages. They were marked by: the amendments to the 1952 Constitution (the April, December, March and September Amendments); the drafting of provisional solutions to define the relations between the supreme organs of state power in the form of the Small Constitution of 1992. The culmination of this evolutionary process was the drafting of a comprehensive constitutional act and the approval of its provisions in a nationwide referendum in May 1997 (the first such event in the Polish constitutional tradition). It was modelled on the solutions of consolidated Western European democracies (primarily France and Germany), while also drawing on the domestic constitutional tradition (Mołdawa, 2018; Pułło, 2006).

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Poland's Trade Relations with the European Union and Investment Flows in the Integration Process

Abstract
Poland's membership in the European Union (EU) since 2004 has brought about myriad benefits, but there are still many challenges that the country has to deal with, including trade. The main aim of this chapter is to present the changes and trends in Poland's trade relations with the EU and the inflow of FDI (foreign direct investments). It is claimed that the process of Poland's integration into the EU has contributed to both an intensification of Poland's foreign trade turnover and an inflow of foreign direct investment. Thus, Poland is taking full advantage of the benefits of the integration processes. During the process of Poland's integration into the EU, trade relations intensified. The process of FDI inflows accompanied the intensification of trade between Poland and the EU. Poland's membership in the EU has been mutually beneficial. Undoubtedly, there are many positive effects visible in Poland. However, there is much to be done to modernise the structure of Polish exports in order to increase the share of innovative products.

Keywords: European Union, Foreign Trade, Foreign Direct Investments, Poland

Introduction

Poland's membership in the European Union (EU) since 2004 has brought many benefits, but there are still many challenges that the country has to deal with, including trade. Certain regulations have emerged that have made economic and political relations with this international grouping more dynamic. The process of Poland's integration with the

European Union began in the 1990s, when a formal agreement was signed as a framework for establishing mutual relations in various fields, including trade, which was called the Europe Agreement, as an instrument of institutional and de facto ties (Kawecka-Wyrzykowska, 1999, pp. 19–24). Its trade section, called the Interim Agreement, laid the groundwork for stimulating mutually beneficial trade relations between the two sides. A process of the gradual liberalisation of foreign trade was implemented, as a result of which Polish products gradually gained free access to the Community market, and the European Community also gained access to the large Polish market. With its accession, Poland became a member of the EU which entailed the adoption of a common trade policy. The process of European integration has affected Poland's trade with EU Member States and with third countries. Poland has achieved certain benefits, which are manifested in the occurrence of such trade effects as the creation and diversion of trade (Ładyka, 2001) in increasing the dynamics of both exports and imports. The intensification of trade relations with the EU was accompanied by a significant inflow of foreign direct investment (FDI), including from the EU, which stimulated Polish exports. However, the systemic transformation taking place in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe may also contribute to positive changes in Poland in terms of economic development (Molendowski, 2012, pp. 57–84; Visvizi, Matysek-Jędrych, Mroczek-Dąbrowska, 2021).

The main aim of the chapter is to present the changes and trends in Poland's trade relations with the EU and in the inflow of FDI. It is claimed that the process of Poland's integration into the EU has contributed to both the intensification of Poland's foreign trade turnover and the inflow of foreign direct investment. Thus, Poland is taking full advantage of the benefits of the integration processes.

This chapter discusses provisions related to the liberalisation of Polish foreign trade in the 1990s, when formal relations between Poland and the European Community were established, and after the country's accession. Next, some changes and tendencies in Polish foreign trade during membership in the EU are analysed. Finally, the flow of FDI into Poland is presented.

The Trade Liberalisation Process Between Poland and the European Community/EU – Benefits and Challenges

The political changes that took place in Poland in the late 1980s gave rise to the development of relations, including those of a formal nature, between Poland and the European Community. In 1991, an association

agreement was signed between Poland and the European Communities, known as the Europe Agreement. This agreement was of great importance to Poland, as its goals included facilitating trade, stabilising economic rules, and ensuring political stability. The provisions of the agreement covered many areas, including not only mutual trade, but also the movement of labour forces, services, capital, the establishment of businesses, and the harmonisation of Polish law with Community law. The Association Agreement laid the foundation for cooperation in the economic, financial, and cultural spheres (Kawecka-Wyrzykowska, Synowiec, 2001, pp. 617–619). As it was indicated, "The Association Agreement will create a new climate for their economic relations and, in particular, for the development of trade and investment as instruments essential for economic restructuring and technological modernisation" (Prezydent RP, 1994).

On 1st February, 1994, the Europe Agreement entered into force. However, its trade part had come about somewhat earlier, on 1st March, 1992 – known as the Interim Agreement. The following section will discuss the provisions on trade liberalisation between Poland and the European Community. The purpose of this process was, among other things, to create a free trade zone for industrial products. Thus, the process of tariff reduction began, and reference duties for further liberalisation were in effect from 29th February, 1992. With regard to non-agricultural products, which accounted for the dominant share of both Polish exports and imports, special provisions applied in the liberalisation process. Some of them are presented below:

- the standstill clause – no new tariffs or any other restrictions were to be imposed, and those that were in place would not be increased (except for safeguard clauses),
- the asymmetry rule – Poland was to open its market later than the Community did. As of 1st March 1, 1992, 45.6% of Polish exports of industrial products were liberalised to the Community market. However, the liberalisation calendar varied for the remaining products. It was longer for products considered sensitive to the Community and which were highly protected. Eventually, the creation of free trade in industrial products was completed for most of Poland's industrial products on 1st January, 1996, and on 1st January, 1997, textiles and apparel followed suit. Customs duties were lifted, as were quantitative restrictions on these products. On the other hand, Poland began removing restrictions on industrial products from the Community on 1st January, 1995. However, the liberalisation process had begun earlier, on 1st March, 1992, for one-third of Polish imports

from the Community in order to modernise the country's economy (Kawecka-Wyrzykowska, Synowiec, 2001, pp. 622–626; Kawecka-Wyrzykowska, 1999).

The abovementioned rules applied to non-agricultural products. However, with regard to agricultural products, they were subject to selective liberalisation, which did not cover all products, but only some of them. The standstill clause did not apply to these products (Kawecka-Wyrzykowska, Synowiec, 2001, pp. 626–628).

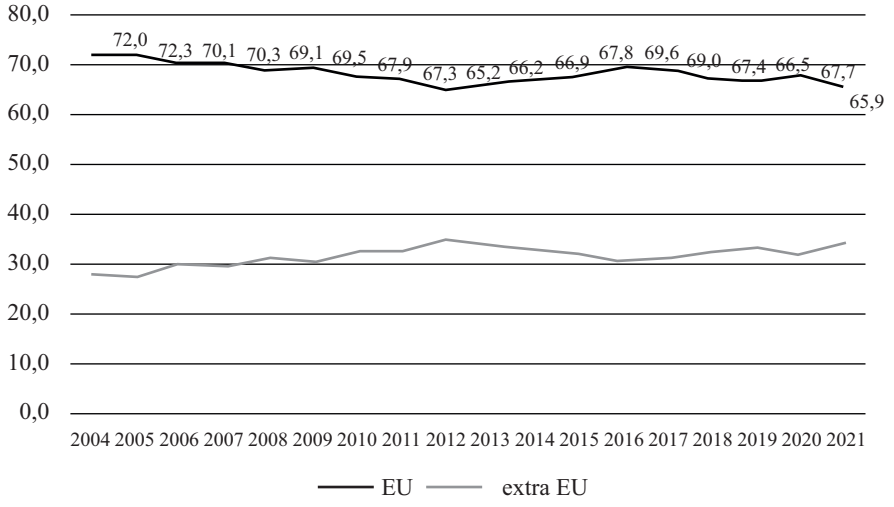
Poland's accession to the EU entailed Poland's inclusion in the single European market, which translated into the free movement of industrial and agricultural products and the adoption of a common EU trade policy (Kaliszuk, 2020, pp. 189–214; Mazur, 2017; Małuszyńska, Mazur, 2015), thus carrying all the principles and instruments of this policy towards third countries. However, Poland's adoption of the principle of the free movement of goods meant the abolition of customs duties and all related fees. However, with regard to industrial goods, almost all of Poland's trade in industrial products with the EU-15 had been liberalised before accession. However, the removal of physical and technical barriers, as well as the elimination of protective measures, was very important in relations with the EU-15. In relations between the EU-10 in terms of trade in industrial products, there were no significant changes post-accession. Only in terms of trade in agricultural products were there more changes observed regarding the rules of their trade, focusing mainly on the removal of tariffs and customs barriers (Molendowski, 2020, pp. 277–280).

Poland's Trade Relations with the EU in 2004–2021

During the analysed period of 2004–2021, Poland's trade with the EU accounted for the dominant share of Polish foreign trade in terms of both imports and exports. In 2004, the EU's share of Poland's imports was 72%, but it declined to 65.2% in 2012, when it then recorded an increase. After that, the trends varied and, in 2021, the EU's share of Poland's imports was 65.9%. This was due to an increase in imports from non-EU third countries. As for Poland's imports from outside the EU[1], the share was 28% in 2004 and 34.1% in 2021 (Fig. 1). This indicates that Polish companies are increasingly looking for goods from outside the EU.

[1] European Union – 27 countries (from 2020).

Figure 1: The Share of Poland’s Imports from the EU and Extra EU in 2004–2021 (as a %)



Source: author’s own elaboration based on data from [Intra and Extra-EU trade by Member State and by product group, 17.09.2022].

In terms of imports, the major partners of Poland are the following countries: German y (39.5%), Italy (9.3%), the Netherlands (7.2%), France (6.2%), and Czechia (5.7%) in 2020 (Table 1).

Table 1: The Share of EU Countries in Poland’s Foreign Trade with the EU in 2020 (in %)

Countries	imports	exports
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**
Germany	39.5	39.1
Czechia	5.7	7.9
France	6.2	7.6
Italy	9.3	5.8
Netherlands	7.2	5.8
Sweden	2.9	4.0
Hungary	2.9	3.4
Spain	4.0	3.4
Slovakia	3.3	3.4
Belgium	4.1	3.2
Romania	1.7	2.8

Austria	3.0	2.7
Denmark	2.2	2.3
Lithuania	1.2	2.0
Finland	1.4	1.1
Latvia	0.4	0.8
Portugal	0.6	0.7
Estonia	0.2	0.7
Bulgaria	0.6	0.6
Greece	0.5	0.6
Ireland	1.0	0.5
Slovenia	0.7	0.5
Croatia	0.2	0.5
Luxembourg	0.2	0.2
Cyprus	0.1	0.1
Unspecified elsewhere in EU countries	0.9	0.0
Malta	0.0	0.0

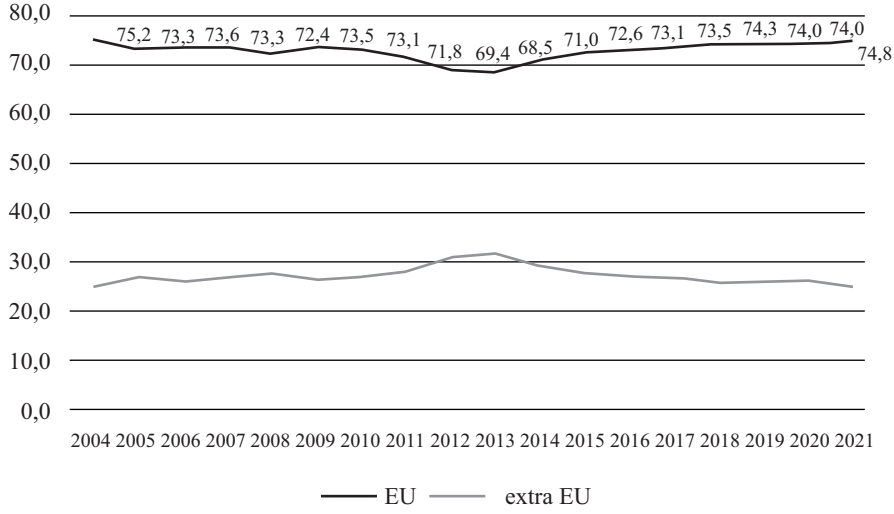
Source: GUS, 2021, p. 37.

Poland's main trading partner in terms of both exports and imports is Germany, amounting to 39.1% and 39.5% respectively in 2020. In terms of exports, the Czech Republic, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, Hungary, Spain, Slovakia, and Belgium are other key buyers of products from Poland. In terms of imports, Poland's main partner is Germany once again with a share of 39.5% in 2020, followed by the Netherlands, France, the Czech Republic, and Spain.

The EU has become and continues to be Poland's main partner in terms of exports. While in 2004 the EU's share of Polish exports was 75.2%, it dropped to 68.5% in 2013, and to 74.0% when the pandemic began in 2020. In 2021, it stood at 74.8%. After Poland's accession to the EU, the share of external markets in Polish exports began to rise, as it accounted for almost 25% in 2004. Then, varied trends followed in terms of exports (Figure 2).

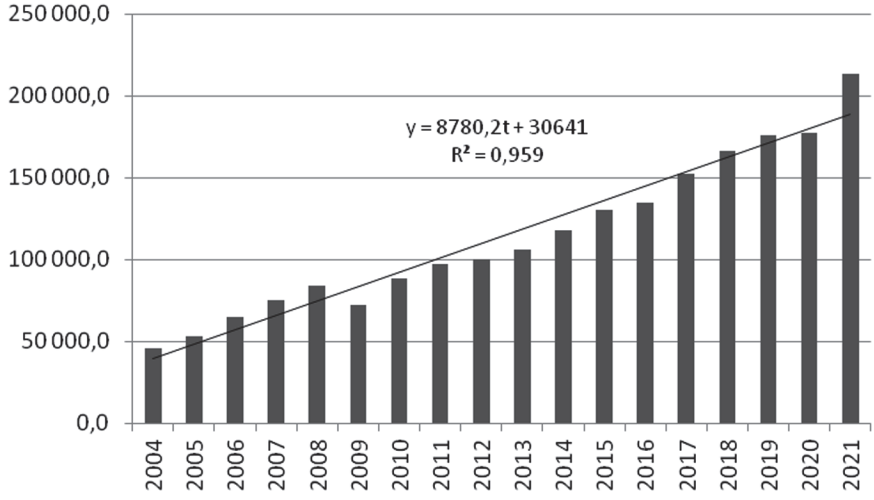
The continuing high share of the EU in Polish exports is also a result of the high dynamics of Polish exports on the European market. In 2004, the value of Polish exports amounted to 45,389 million euros to the EU, while for third countries it was 14,943 million euros. It means that, in terms of value, it was about 3 times higher than the EU (Figure 3, Table 2). As Figure 3 shows, there is a noticeable, upward trend in Polish exports to EU markets. The situation is similar for Polish imports from the EU (Figure 4).

Figure 2: The Share of Poland’s Exports to the EU and Extra EU in 2004–2021 (in %)



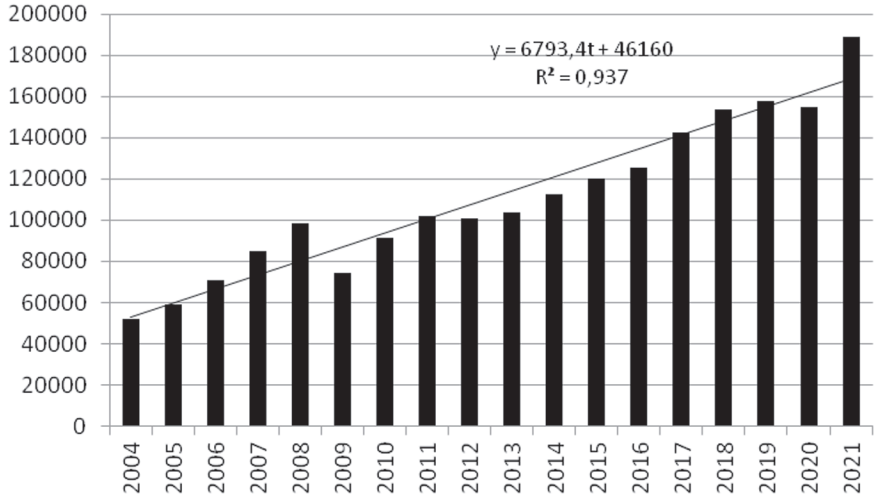
Source: author’s own elaboration based on data from Intra and Extra-EU trade by Member State and by product group, 17.09.2022.

Figure 3: Poland’s Exports to the EU in 2004–2021 (euros in millions)



Source: author’s own elaboration based on data from (Intra and Extra-EU trade by Member State and by product group, 17.09.2022).

Figure 4: Poland's Imports from the EU in 2004–2021 (euros in millions)



Source: author's own elaboration based on data from Intra and Extra-EU trade by Member State and by product group, 17.09.2022.

Polish exporters are successfully reaching out to EU markets, which is reflected in the foreign trade surplus with European partners. The largest surplus in Poland's exports was recorded with Germany, followed by the Czech Republic and France in 2020. A trade deficit was recorded only with Italy and Slovenia (Figure 5).

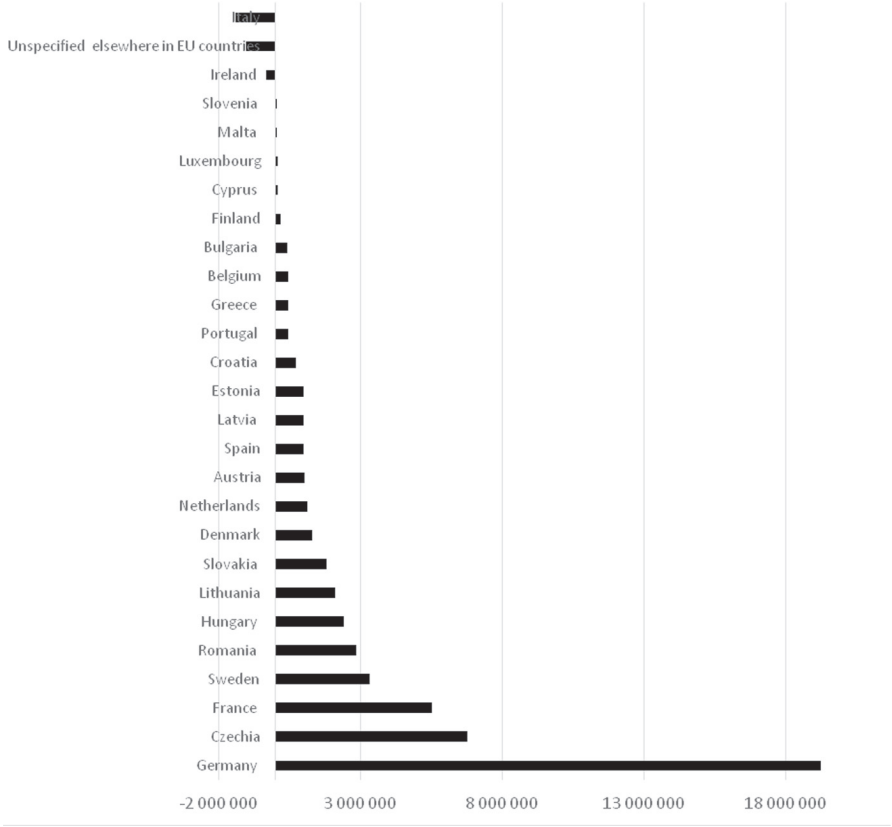
As for the trade balance, Poland's trade relations with non-EU countries recorded a deficit throughout the analysed period of 2004–2021 (Table 3). The opposite situation occurs in relations with EU countries; after accession until 2012, a trade deficit was recorded, and then a surplus, which amounted to 24,842 million euros in 2021. This means that Polish products are very attractive on the European market, and Polish producers have some specific advantages over their European counterparts. However, Polish companies compete on the EU market mainly using a price advantage (or including elements of non-price competition). This type of competitiveness was particularly important in Polish exports to Germany, as well as to the Czech Republic and Hungary, as indicated by a 2019 survey. This situation can be influenced by a number of factors, including the low innovativeness of Polish products, their relatively low quality, the intensity of competition, and the lack of export diversification (Ambroziak, Duchnowska, 2019).

Table 2: Poland’s Foreign Trade with the EU in 2004–2021

	Exports to the EU				Imports from the EU			
	Value, millions EUR		Indices of dynamics, previous year=100		Value, millions EUR		Indices of dynamics, previous year=100	
Years	EU	Extra EU	EU	Extra EU	EU	Extra EU	EU	Extra EU
2004	45,389	14,942.7			51,889.8	20,219		
2005	52,728.8	19,160.5	1,162	1,282	59 036.3	22,660.3	1,138	1,121
2006	64,904.7	23,324.2	1,231	1,217	70,888	30,250.4	1,201	1,335
2007	74,933.7	27,325.7	1,155	1,172	85,057	35,854.8	1,200	1,185
2008	83,863.7	32,031	1,119	1,172	98,151.4	43,815.1	1,154	1,222
2009	71,921.9	25,943.6	0,858	0,810	74,488.1	32,666.5	0,759	0,746
2010	88,015.8	32,466.8	1,224	1,251	91,130.7	43,175	1,223	1,322
2011	97,282.7	38,275.1	1,105	1,179	101,761.2	49,529.8	1,117	1,147
2012	100,199.4	44,083	1,030	1,152	100,950.6	53,983.5	0,992	1,090
2013	105,719.6	48,624.1	1,055	1,103	103,486.8	52,831.9	1,025	0,979
2014	117,728.4	47,986.4	1,114	0,987	112,711	55,655.3	1,089	1,053
2015	130,353	49,179.6	1,107	1,025	120,169	57,013.1	1,066	1,024
2016	134,559.5	49,611.7	1,032	1,009	125,390.8	54,894.6	1,043	0,963
2017	152,523.1	54,862.3	1,133	1,106	142,639.9	64,180.6	1,138	1,169
2018	165,933.9	57,279.2	1,088	1,044	153,536.4	74,259.9	1,076	1,157
2019	176,149.1	62,029.3	1,062	1,083	157,558.6	79,432.3	1,026	1,070
2020	177,077	62,136.8	1,005	1,002	154,883.4	73,768.1	0,983	0,929
2021	213,661.1	72,170.4	1,207	1,161	188,819	97,589.5	1,219	1,323
			1,095	1,097			1,079	1,097
		Average rate of change	**9.5%**	**9.7%**			7.9%	9.7%

Source: author’s own elaboration based on data from Intra and Extra-EU trade by Member State and by product group, 17.09.2022.

Figure 5: Poland's Foreign Trade Balance with EU Member States in 2020 (euros in thousands, current prices)



Source: GUS, p. 37.

Table 3: Poland's Trade Balance with the EU and with Extra-EU Countries (euros in millions)

Years	Extra-EU	EU	All countries of the world
2004	-5,276.3	-6,500.8	-11,777.1
2005	-3,499.9	-6,307.6	-9,807.5
2006	-6,926.2	-5,983.2	-12,909.4
2007	-8,529.1	-10,123.4	-18,652.5
2008	-11,784	-14,287.7	-26,071.7
2009	-6,722.8	-2,566.2	-9,289.1
2010	-10,708.2	-3,114.9	-13,823.1
2011	-11,254.6	-4,478.6	-15,733.2

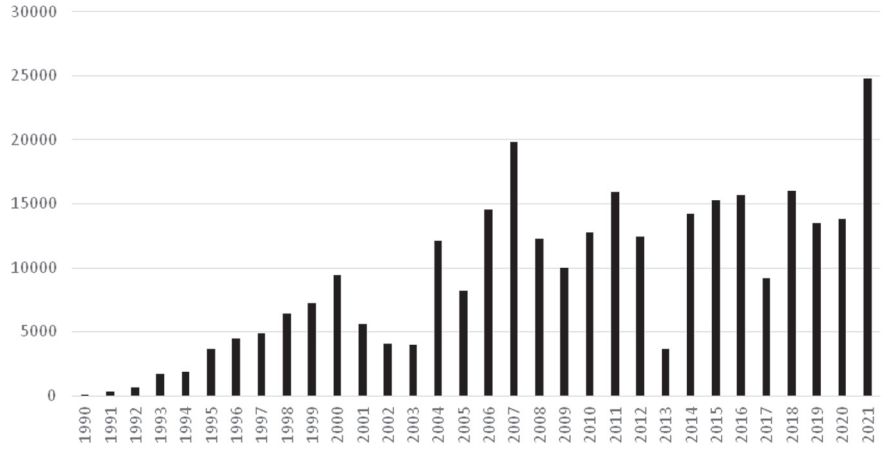
2012	-9,900.5	-751.2	-10,651.7
2013	-4,207.8	2,232.8	-1,975
2014	-7,668.9	5,017.4	-2,651.5
2015	-7,833.4	10,184	2,350.6
2016	-5,282.9	9,168.8	3,885.9
2017	-9,318.3	9,883.2	564.9
2018	-16,980.7	12,397.5	-4,583.2
2019	-17,403	18,590.5	1,187.5
2020	-11,631.4	22,193.5	10,562.2
2021	-25,419.2	24,842.1	-577.1

Source: this Table is based on data from Intra and Extra-EU trade by Member State and by product group, 17.09.2022.

The Flow of FDI into Poland in the Years 1990–2021

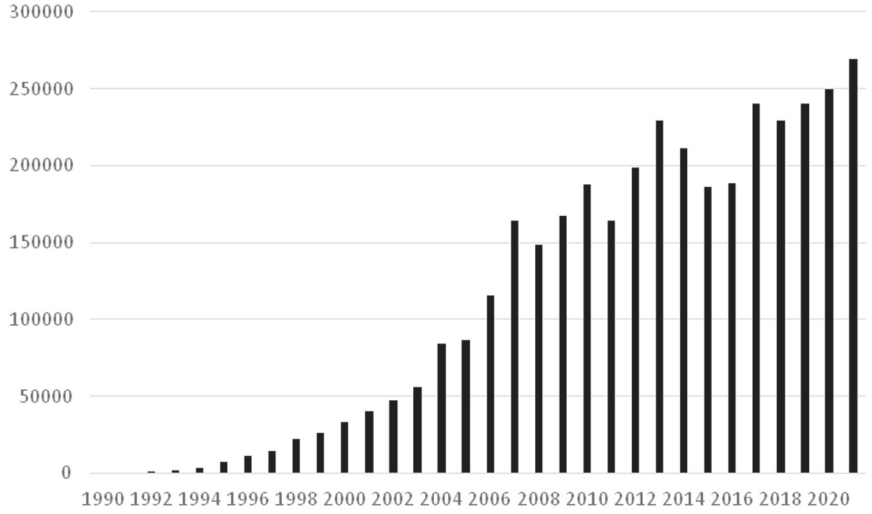
The process of opening the Polish market has been accompanied by an inflow of FDI into Poland. While in 1990 the FDI inflow to Poland stood at $88 million, in 2007 it was $19,836.2 million. In the first year of the pandemic, FDI inflow amounted to $13,831.4 million, and, a year later, to $24,815.95 million, the highest value in the period under review. As a result, Poland’s FDI stock amounted to $269,224.9 million (Figures 6 and 7). It is worth noting that the inflow of FDI to Poland stimulated foreign

Figure 6: The Inflow of FDI in Poland in the Years 1990–2021 (USD in millions at current prices)



Source: author’s own elaboration based on UNCTADStat, 19.09.2022.

Figure 7: The Stock of FDI in Poland in the Years 1990–2021 (USD in millions at current prices)



Source: author's own elaboration based on UNCTADStat, 19.09.2022.

trade. Initially, capital goods and raw materials were imported to start or develop production with foreign capital share. Therefore, a high deficit in Poland's trade with the European Community occurred in the 1990s. After that, imports were, to some extent, replaced by domestic production.

The processes of integration and stabilisation of the economic and political situation in Poland have contributed to the attractiveness of Poland as reflected in the value of the stock capital. In 1990, the value of FDI stock amounted to $109 million, and then gradually increased in the year of accession, reaching $84,102.12 million, and, in 2021, FDI stock amounted to $269,224.9 million.

Conclusions

During the process of Poland's integration into the EU, trade relations intensified. The Europe Agreement laid the foundation for further relations between Poland and the European Union, including those related to trade relations. Provisions in the Interim Agreement initiated trade liberalisation to stimulate mutual trade relations and promote economic growth. Indeed, there was a relatively rapid increase in the changes in exports and imports, The process of FDI inflows accompanied an intensification of trade between Poland and the EU. It contributed to

the modernisation of export production as well as to an increase in Polish exports. At the beginning of trade liberalisation, there was a deficit in foreign trade between Poland and the EU, mainly to meet the needs of exporting companies for raw material supplies and to meet the needs of consumers. Polish exporters gradually became more competitive on the EU market, which stimulated further exports. As a result, Poland's trade relations with the EU experienced a trade surplus. Poland's membership in the EU was mutually beneficial. Undoubtedly, there are many positive effects to be seen in Poland. However, there is much to be done to modernise the structure of Polish exports in order to increase the share of innovative products.

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Poland's Success in Attracting Foreign Direct Investment: Determinants and Prospects

Abstract
Poland is one of the most attractive destinations for foreign direct investment (FDI). The reasons for this include integration with the European Union (EU) and membership in the common market. As a recipient of FDI, Poland benefits from its EU membership and geographical proximity to major investors. The purpose of this article is to assess and discuss Poland's position as an FDI recipient and to identify the main determinants of its attractiveness. The article reviews the literature on FDI research in Poland and indicates Poland's prospects in the area of competing for FDI. The following research methods were used: descriptive method in the study of literature and analysis of statistical data showing the position of Poland in terms of FDI made in Poland.

Keywords: Foreign Direct Investment, European Integration, Investment Attractiveness, European Union, Poland

Introduction

The free movement of capital underpinned the announcement of deepening economic integration within the then Communities in the mid-1980s. The free movement of capital, together with the ultimate goal of creating an economic and monetary union (EMU) when the Single European Act came into force, became a reality. Since January 1, 1994, free movement of capital has been in full force within the European Union, and this would also apply to relations with third countries.

The implementation of the free movement of capital was a challenge for all members of the then Communities due to the short time of presence in

the grouping, balance of payments or foreign debt problems. Therefore, countries such as Spain, Greece, Ireland and Portugal were granted the opportunity to benefit from a transition period until the end of 1990. This period was extended by another 3 years (Stępniak, 2005). Poland, after joining the European Union applied a transitional period, set until 2016 (since accession), with regard to the free movement of capital, which gave the possibility to apply national regulations to the acquisition of agricultural and forestry properties.

Currently, the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) provides for restrictions on capital inflows from third countries only when the functioning of the EMU is threatened. Free movement of capital includes cross-border transfers of money and other transactions that involve the transfer of property in terms of assets and liabilities, such as real estate investment, direct investment, securities trading, credit and loans, and payment systems.

Discussion on the Role of FDI in the National Economy

FDI, due to its peculiarity of having long-term effects on the economy and its constituent entities, is particularly important for the economic development of individual countries. FDI is a phenomenon that, together with the foreign investor and its ability to influence the strategic direction of the company through control of at least 10% of the shares (non-preferred) or votes at the general meeting of shareholders[1] affects not only the entity itself, but also the environment. Macroeconomic effects on FDI recipients, as well as on FDI exporters have been discussed very extensively in the literature.

On the research ground, analyses of FDI in Poland focus on issues related to the identification of factors determining the volume of incoming capital, the determinants of regional variation in the location of investment in Poland and the analysis of the phenomenon of FDI as a factor affecting the competitiveness of the Polish economy in the broadest sense. K. Przybylska (1998) analyzed factors such as the size of the market and prospects for its development, labor costs, political and economic stability, privatization, government regulations key to FDI made in Poland, Czechia and Hungary. M. Kozłowska (2015) emphasized the importance of the investment climate as a key factor in attracting FDI, as well as the diversity in terms of attractiveness of regions in Poland. Many authors focused on analyzing the impact of integration on the inflow of FDI to Poland and emphasized the positive impact of European

[1] Definition of OECD based on OECD (2008).

integration on this process (Siemiątkowski, Górnewicz, 2006; Lizińska, 2014; Cieślik, 2018).

The discussion around the FDI is very dynamic, as the impact of inflow of FDI to the economy may vary depending on the structure and specific features of national economy. Contribution of foreign owned companies to exports differ between countries (GUS, 2019; Joebges, 2017) also in terms of creation of employment (Rytter Sunesen et al., 2020) or innovation (Doran et al., 2013; Halpern, Muraközy, 2012).

The current research conducted for the Asian region for two periods 1996–2018 and 2019–2020 revealed that economic growth, domestic investment, imports and exports affect the FDI. In COVID-19 time FDI stability results from the economic characteristics of the region (Romdhane et al., 2022). However, the researchers underline the ambiguous character of FDI. This approach focuses on the dark side of FDI and underlines for example existence of the clash between the wealth of MNEs and the financial constraints of local companies which are at the bottom of the economic pyramid. Following that, the literature assigned to MNEs the feature of ability to crowd out the local companies or the role of giants with political impact (Forsgren, 2008).

The views on FDI are not giving a clear picture in at least three dimensions: economic growth and development; transfer of knowledge and technology and finally income inequality (Dowlah, 2018). The relativization and discussion of FDI effects on host economies in terms of economic growth and economic development are mainly discussed in macro-focused research (Herzer et al., 2008; Tintin, 2012). In the area of knowledge transfer and know-how quoting Visaak and Roolaht (2005) revealed the negative impact of FDI as the Estonian economy became dependent on technology transfer from MNEs (Vissak, Roolaht, 2005). Chintrakarn et al. (2012) came up with the conclusion that FDI negatively influences the demand for a skilled labour force through the fact the FDI in the host country becomes a services centre for the headquarters of MNEs.

As the global economy has faced since few years, many of game changers like COVID-19, deglobalization as a result, the discussion on the role of FDI seems never-ending, especially in context of its significance to the resilience of economy. It is observed that domestically owned companies in times of crisis suffer from liquidity constraints which may lead to acquisitions by foreign-owned companies at low prices (Calderon, Didier, 2009). It is suggested that FDI among international capital flows is the most stable form in times of crisis. It is a consequence of character of FDI, which causes positive externalities for the host economy through the dissemination of technology and managerial practices in the local

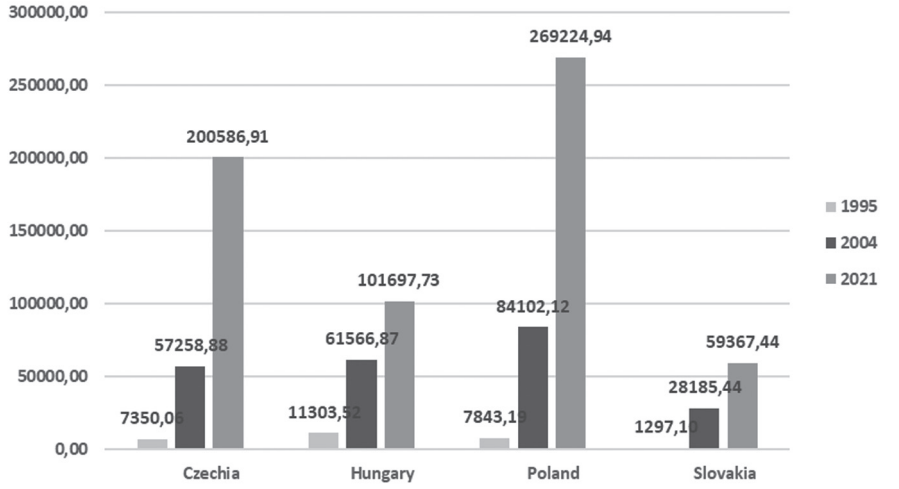
economy and is more stable compared to other alternative form (Lipsey, 2000).

Foreign Direct Investment over the Years: Selected Determinants

Poland attractiveness, which is highly ranked in global and European ranking, is the result of the economic potential, educational quality and localization. As the FDI may vary in terms of caused of FDI it might be said that FDI in Poland, are mainly market seeking, as the scale of economic activity plays important role. In many rankings, the attractiveness is discussed in the context of Poland's deep economic integration with other Member States (MS) (AHK, 2022). One of the key drivers attract the FDI is availability of labour (WIR, 2020; Schwab, 2019). Access to well-educated and skilled workforce in Poland is one of the advantageous on which Poland's attractiveness is built.

In terms of stock of FDI, Poland keeps the role of leader since many years. In 2021 inward stock of FDI amounted to USD 269224,9 mln, from USD 7843,1 mln in Poland. In comparison to other countries of our region like Czechia or Hungary, Poland stands out (Figure 1). The increase of inward stock FDI is stable over the years and rapid growth is dated at the beginning 2000's when Poland where on integration path to the EU membership.

Figure 1: Stock of FDI (mln USD)



Source: own elaboration on the basis of UNCTADstat, https://unctadstat.unctad.org/wds/TableViewer/tableView.aspx (Access 11.09.2022).

When we look at the share of inward stock FDI in GDP, the situation changes. However, Poland increased the share from 5.51% in 1995 to 40.29%, the other countries economies are characterized by more intensive engagement of FDI in the national economy. For example, in Czechia the share of stock FDI in GDP in 2021 is estimated at 70.76%, what reveals the existing gap in Poland. The intensity of engaged foreign capital results mainly from the size of the economy (Figure 2). It suggests untapped potential for the adoption of new FDI flows in Poland. Very similar situation is observed in terms of stock FDI per capita. It gives coherent picture with share of stock FDI in GDP. Poland notices the lowest level of inward stock FDI per capita (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Share of Inward Stock FDI in GDP (%) in Selected Countries (1995, 2004, 2021)

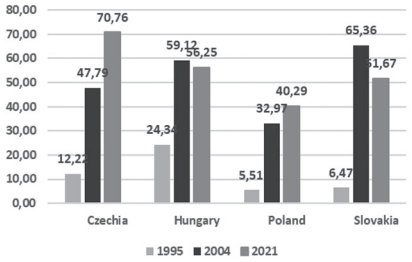
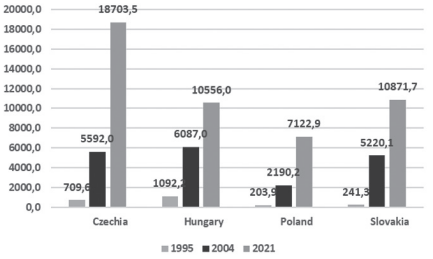


Figure 3: Inward Stock of FDI per capita in Selected Countries (USD)



Source: own elaboration on the basis of UNCTADstat, https://unctadstat.unctad.org/wds/TableViewer/tableView.aspx (Access 11.09.2022).

As mentioned above, for Poland the process of integration with the EU is still of the key determinants in investors eyes (AHK, 2022). The membership in EU and following the European rules is a guarantee of stability and predictability of the economic and political surrounding in which investors operate on regular basis. In terms of the structure of FDI in Poland, at the end of 2020 service sector dominated (57.5%), followed by manufacturing sector with share 32.8% and construction 5.3% (NBP, 2021).

Poland was ranked by The World Bank among the countries that made the transition from "limited manufacturing" to "advanced manufacturing and services" between 1990 and 2015 (World Bank Group, 2020). According to data from NBP, in 2020 on the basis of "Foreign direct investment inward position at the end of 2020 broken down by economic activity of the direct investment enterprise", the portfolio of FDI in Poland is very diverse. In service sector top five areas of economic activity provided in Poland include (NBP, 2021):

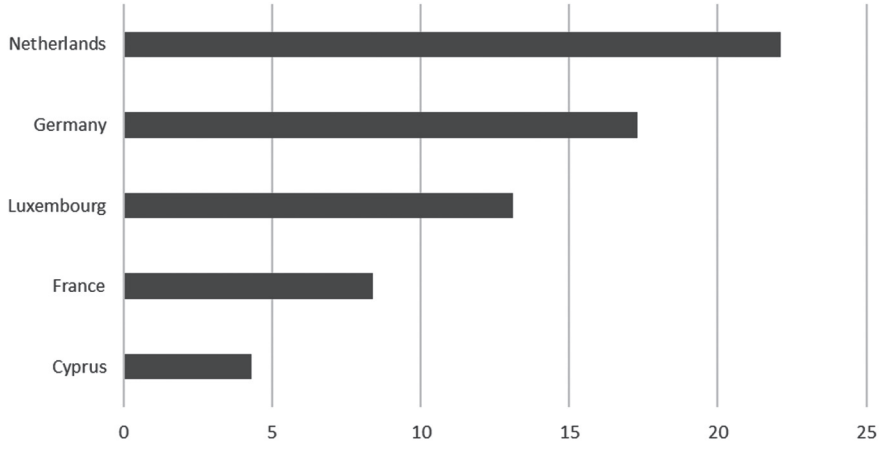
- Financial intermediation, except for insurance and pension funding,
- Wholesale trade, except for motor vehicles and motor cycles,
- Activities of head offices; management consultancy activities,
- Retail trade, except for motor vehicles and motor cycles,
- Management consultancy act.

In manufacturing, top five economic activities attracting FDI are as follows:

- Manufacture of motor vehicles, trailers, semi-trailers & other transport equipment,
- Manufacture of metal & machinery products, except for electrical equipment,
- Manufacture of food products; beverages and tobacco products,
- Manufacture of motor vehicles, trailers and semitrailers,
- Manufacture of petroleum, chemicals, pharmaceutical products, rubber & plastic products.

The concentration of inward FDI from EU is a consequence of EU membership. Over 87% of FDI comes from EU28. Among the MS, the leaders in the inward stock of FDI are the Netherlands (22%), Germany (17%), Luxembourg (13%), France (8%) and Cyprus (4%).

Figure 4: Share of Top 5 Investors in Poland in 2020 (%)



Source: own calculations on basis of NBP data.

Poland Prospects in the Race for FDI

As already underlined, crucial argument for building the fundament for investor's trust is the Polish membership in the EU. Following the EU rules and adjustment undertaken by Poland on the road to EU

created favourable surrounding to invest in Poland. Nevertheless, FDI is supported by corporations, which are seeking for specific features of economy where the competitive advantage of their business can be built. According to AHK (2021) the advantages of Polish economy are (beside the EU membership): qualified workforce and availability of local suppliers.

The outbreak of the COVID pandemic19 proved to be a stress-test for many companies, and consequently for entire economies. The sudden drop in capital flows globally revealed that the rules of the game in the race for FDI would be transformed (Umiński, Borowicz, 2021). The Covid-19 outbreak caused global collapse of FDI flows: it decreased by 34% to $1 trillion in 2020 and by 58% in developed countries. In 2021, a new optimism poured from data on FDI which increased by 64% in comparison to 2020. Reaching the level of $1,58 trillion in 2021, in 2022 FDI will be under the pressure of Russia invasion in Ukraine, instability in fuel sectors, inflation and increase of interest rates, what will significantly affect cross-border investments (UNCTAD, 2020; 2021; 2022).

Poland has been ranked among the top FDI Reformers in 1997–2017 within the survey by OECD "FDI Regulatory Restrictiveness Index" (Mistura, Roulet, 2019), which places this country among the most attractive locations for new FDI. Poland compared to other countries in the region like Czechia, Hungary or Slovakia still has the space for effective absorption of FDI project. It means that Poland shall be active in the area of attracting the FDI as it is foreseen that on the global scene new players are coming, for example from Africa, which compete with low-cost labour force (Amaro, Miles, 2006). At the same time slowdown in FDI flows will put higher pressure on competing for FDI countries like Poland and other CEE countries.

In the face of changing conditions and rules for competing for FDI, the ability to adapt and reorient strategies towards foreign investors will be crucial. Poland has a great opportunity to be the winner of this race, as it offers a scale of operation (market size) that other countries in the region cannot provide. Moreover, access to skilled, well-educated workers is another crowning argument for locating FDI projects in Poland.

Conclusions

Poland over the years has been among the countries that are significant players in the race for FDI. Foreign investors were particularly interested in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when Poland began preparing for EU membership. Deepening economic integration, first demanded that

Poland meet many requirements and a long process of adjustment in the legal, institutional and administrative fields. However, even then it was a clear signal to investors that Poland was moving toward economic and political stability. This is what significantly affected confidence in Poland as a location for foreign investment. Despite the fact that 18 years of Poland's membership in the EU have already passed, rankings assessing countries in terms of attractiveness indicate this fact as one of the key aspects. However, in the case of the Polish economy, numerous other factors should be pointed out that increase the country's attractiveness in the eyes of investors. These are its geographic location in the middle of Europe, access to a large market (Polish and European) and, what has been particularly emphasized in recent years, access to qualified employees with experience and new ones coming out of universities that are educating at an increasingly higher level.

The challenge facing the Polish economy is its ability to stabilize economically in the face of global turbulence like the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Looking ahead to the next few years, Poland will have to actively engage in competing for FDI inflows, as competition for foreign capital streams is growing on the map and there are more and more competing for them. Today, it seems that Poland and its regions will be able to adjust their offerings to the needs of investors and look for such FDI projects that are future-oriented as in the semiconductor or microchip industries.

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The Support for Start-ups in Central and Eastern Europe and the Growing Importance of Poland's Ecosystem

Abstract
Despite many positive developments and its unquestionable potential, Central and Eastern Europe is still lagging behind the best-developed, innovative ecosystems when it comes to attracting start-ups. The ranking of individual countries presented in *The Global Start-up Ecosystem Index Report 2021* clearly shows that the start-up ecosystems of Central and Eastern Europe are not developing as quickly as ecosystems in Western European countries. Nevertheless, recent trends indicate promising perspectives for the region. The ability of public and private stakeholders to address challenges and to build trust and credibility vis-à-vis international investors will be pivotal to the future development of start-ups in the region.
This paper examines the recent developments and trends pertaining to start-up ecosystems across Central and Eastern Europe as well as Poland's perspective as a leader in supporting start-ups among CEE countries. Thanks to the consequent and forward-looking strategies pertaining to innovation and competitiveness, Poland has become an undisputed leader among CEE countries with respect to the maturity of the start-up ecosystem. A well-developed institutional and regulatory system supported by a broad cooperative network of agencies, funds, accelerators, incubators, along with VC funds and other institutions provide a solid framework for

young, innovative companies. Financing challenges have been addressed by significant public funds which are to be invested in start-ups. Similar to other CEE countries, the most common form of support for new technologies and innovation in Poland are public funds; in particular, EU funds. The COVID-19 pandemic has been an unprecedented challenge for many young entrepreneurs, but at the same time it has triggered the fast development of information and communication technologies (ICT) which could result in a higher number of innovative start-ups with global potential.

Keywords: Innovation, Start-up, Ecosystem, Eastern Europe Countries, Central Europe Countries, Poland

Introduction

The term "start-up" is usually associated with innovation perceived as a driving force of economic growth and social development. Innovation can be defined in many different ways. Commonly, it is defined as the ability and motivation of various economic stakeholders to act in a constant strive for new R&D results, along with new concepts and ideas. The notion of innovation can also pertain to creative individuals, groups, and systems showing strong readiness to search for and implement new solutions, ideas, and concepts. In that context, innovation should be perceived as one of the key elements of a modern enterprise. It is primarily the ability of a company to implement research results and new ideas which determine that company's competitive position and its prospects for development.

Contemporary processes of economic and social development are also conditioned by factors of an intangible nature. These factors include, among others, knowledge, innovation, and human creativity. They constitute the essence of the so-called "learning economy" – a concept that has replaced the "knowledge-based economy" in recent years. So, for the regional innovation system, the main functions are the functions of the economy based on knowledge, as well as its production, circulation, and diffusion. All institutions that contribute to the creation of a regional innovation system take a direct part in this process, but the degree of their participation varies. Economic entities are mainly responsible for the diffusion of knowledge, while universities and research and development institutions are responsible for the production of knowledge. Business-environment institutions, regional administration, as well as universities and research institutions are responsible for the circulation of knowledge. This is done by organising competitions, exhibitions, exchanges, innovation fairs, mobility programs for people between science and industry (especially in SMEs), cooperation between private companies and research units, substantive and financial assistance for newly established

innovative companies' goal-oriented simulation programs, and the search for creative personalities (Matusiak, 2007, pp. 7–16).

The regional innovation system[1] includes a network of private and public entities focused on cooperation, which results in the dissemination of innovation in the region (Lambooy, 2005).

Start-up Ecosystems in Central and Eastern Europe

Central and Eastern Europe[2] is a region of over 20 countries with unique political contexts, diverse cultures, and complex histories. Located strategically in the heart of Europe, it has a sizeable market with high consumer demand. In addition, the region offers easy access to the entire EU single market. Key determinants of the region's growth and its recent success stories have been *inter alia* well-educated, high-skilled professionals, less expensive labour, well-developed infrastructure, and a high-concentration of technology companies, combined with an innovation-friendly environment stimulated by its governments. The level of ambition and motivation presented by CEE entrepreneurs is outperforming that in many other regions. CEE countries have also accumulated strong technical expertise and the extensive business knowledge. Over recent years, the ecosystems in the CEE have developed dynamically to be at the forefront of the European start-up landscape.

[1] The innovative system is a set of subsystems which include, among others;

- a production and service subsystem built by enterprises operating in the technological and industrial area, and the implementation and commercialisation of new solutions;
- a scientific and research subsystem, which includes various types of research and development entities, and higher education institutions and other science institutions operating in the field of innovation and technology transfer;
- an institutional subsystem, created by entities supporting the course of innovation processes. These are, among others, technology parks and incubators, and technology transfer centres;
- a socio-cultural subsystem characterised by cultural elements unique for a given region (tradition, history), value systems, forms and channels of communication, the level of trust – a system of specific ways of behaviour and the unique cultural and structural features of a given region *Regions 2020. An Assessment of Future Challenges for EU Regions*, Commission Staff Working Document, SEC(2008), European Commission 2008.

[2] Central and Eastern Europe is a term encompassing the countries of the Baltics, Central Europe, Eastern Europe, and Southeast Europe (mostly the Balkans), usually with reference to former communist states from the Eastern Bloc and the Warsaw Pact in Europe. Scholarly literature often uses the abbreviations CEE or CEEC for this term. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) also uses the term "Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs)" for a group comprising some of these countries.

A lot of factors can explain this phenomenon. Despite cultural diversities, CEE countries share a lot of common characteristics which determine the recent innovation and start-up boom.

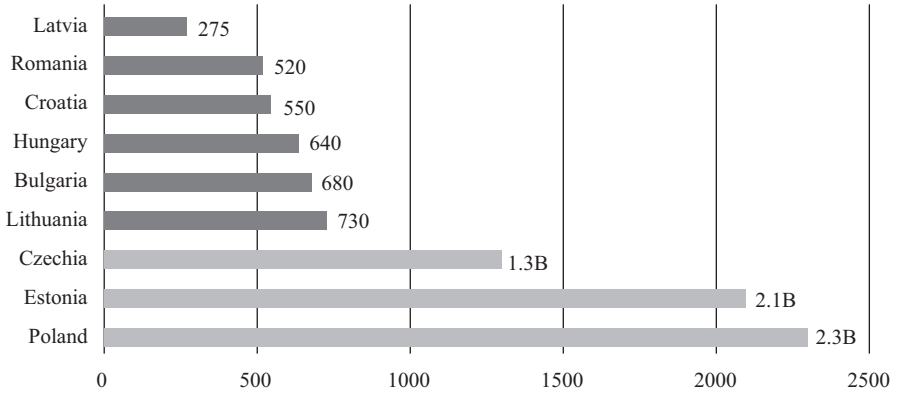
The EU's Cohesion Policy has played a significant role in developing an environment conducive to innovation and entrepreneurship. Significant funds have been allocated to CEE countries so that they can develop innovation along with systems supporting innovation-driven growth. Benefiting from EU funds and using the own huge potential, the countries in the CEE region have developed forward-looking regulations supporting innovation and start-ups. For instance, the government of Estonia have introduced extensive programs to stimulate innovation. The governments of Lithuania and Estonia offer special start-up visas for entrepreneurs. In Poland, the government has initiated an umbrella program to solidify a start-up ecosystem. Many other CEE countries also develop both attractive domestic solutions as well as cross-border collaboration aimed at strengthening CEE start-ups and a funding community. Consequently, the CEE region, while offering various interesting opportunities for investing and founding, has become a key destination for investors, including Venture Capital (VC) funds seeking higher returns.

Venture capital's presence in the Central and Eastern Europe has been a key determinant of the growth of the CEE ecosystem. Due to its uniqueness and major potential, the CEE region has attracted private equity and VC investors. Increase in the capital invested in start-ups has further improved the competitiveness of the region. Having grown by 7.6 times in terms of VC funding since 2017, the CEE has become the fastest developing region in Europe. Over the last few years, the CEE region has experienced unprecedented growth in venture capital investments. Estonia, Poland, Czechia, and Lithuania were the frontrunners in strengthening their start-up support ecosystems. Croatia, Bulgaria, and Romania have also experienced a dynamic development in that regard. As shown below, 52% of the CEE s VC funding, cumulative 2017–2022, excluding megarounds (rounds above 100M euros), is concentrated in Poland, Estonia, and Czechia.

As presented in Table 1 below, in 2021, start-ups from the CEE region secured over 5.4 billion euros in VC funding in almost 1020 rounds.[3] This constitutes a significant increase in funding compared to 2020, where start-ups secured over 2.2 billion euros in ca. 1200 rounds. Combined venture capital investment in the CEE has more than doubled since 2020. The region is expected to raise 6.2 billion euros in 2022.

[3] The data shows only disclosed rounds, which means that the actual funding was higher.

Figure 1: VC Funding Cummulative, excl. Megarounds, 2017–2022 (in Mio euro)



* megarounds mean rounds above 100M
Source: Central and Eastern European start-ups 2022; https://dealroom.co/uploaded/2022/11/Dealroom-GoogleAtomicCredo-CEE-2022.pdf?x84064.

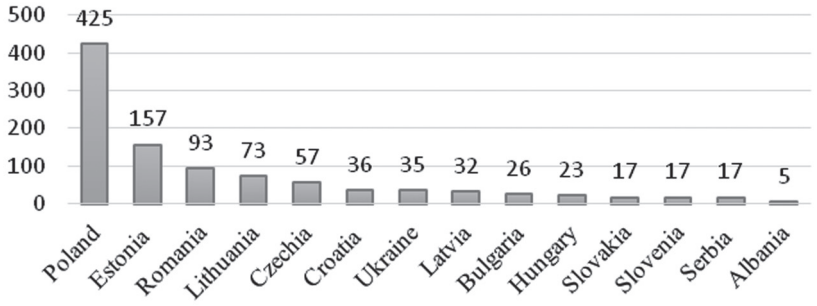
Table 1: VC Investments in the CEE (2021 vs. 2020)

	2020	2021
Total value of VC funding	2.2 billion euros	5.4 billion euros
Number of investment rounds	1205	1019
Biggest disclosed funding rounds	UiPath: 191 million euros Bolt: 150 million euros Brainly: 68 million euros Hyperscience: 190 million euros	UiPath: 623 million euros Bolt: 600 million euros Vinted: 250 million euros Rohli: 190 million euros Grammarly: 174 million euros
Funding rounds per country	Poland: 313 rounds Estonia: 145 rounds Ukraine: 135 rounds Hungary:135 rounds	Poland: 425 rounds Estonia: 157 rounds Romania: 93 rounds
Priority industries	Artificial Intelligence, Big Data, analytics, e-commerce, advertising, healthcare, block-chain, financial services, marketplaces, agriculture.	AI, healthcare, internet services, e-commerce, finance, shared-services, delivery, analytics

Source: author's own analysis based on: https://www.vestbee.com/blog/articles/vc-transactions-in-cee-report-2021 and https://www.vestbee.com/blog/articles/vc-funding-in-cee-report-2020.

The year 2021 was very successful as regards the number of investment rounds and their value. Poland was the leader in the CEE as far as the number investment rounds was concerned with Poland's 425 rounds out of 1019 total for the CEE. Start-ups in Estonia, Romania, and Lithuania account for 157, 93, and 73 funding rounds respectively. This is not surprising bearing in mind that Poland is the largest start-up ecosystem in the region. Estonia and Lithuania have great legal conditions to develop start-ups and an extensive culture of innovation. Likewise, Romania has recently become an attractive market for investment.

Figure 2: Number of VC Funding Rounds in CEE Countries (2021)



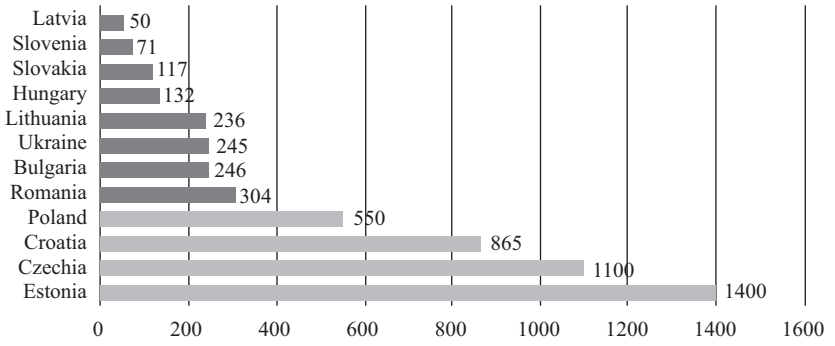
Source: https://www.vestbee.com/blog/articles/vc-transactions-in-cee-report-2021.

2022 has only strengthened positive trends observed in CEE regions. Although recent external factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, high inflation, and threats of recession have negatively affected international markets, so far, most of the local and regional early-stage VCs have not been significantly affected (Koncerewicz, 2021). Despite significant deterioration in both political and market conditions in 2022, the CEE region has shown strong resilience.

After an impressive 2021, 2022 should be another strong year for VCs and start-ups in CEE. In terms of capital funding, according to recent data in the report entitled *Central and Eastern European start-ups 2022*, Estonia, Czechia, Croatia, and Poland were responsible for over 70% of VC investment in the CEE region.

VC funding has led to significant job creation in CEE. CEE start-ups are ranked among the highest in Europe for jobs created per euro of venture capital invested. Most of the jobs have been created in Ukraine, Slovenia, Slovakia, Serbia, Romania, Hungary, Belarus, and Poland. In terms of industries, traditionally, the most VC financing has been attracted by enterprise software. The significant value areas include also process

Figure 3: VC Funding Value in 2022 (in Mio euro)



Source: Central and Eastern European start-ups 2022; https://dealroom.co/uploaded/2022/11/Dealroom-GoogleAtomicCredo-CEE-2022.pdf?x84064.

automation, developer and collaboration tools, software development, cyber security, marketing, and sales. The data for 2022 shows that the CEE has diversified investment into prospective new sectors. As the start-up ecosystem matures, growing start-up activities are observed in many other segments including disruptive technologies such as Web3 and Crypto (dealroom.co, 2022).

The CEE region has also been one of the fastest growing regions in Europe in terms of enterprise value. A recent study by Dealroom, Google for start-ups, and AtomicCredo (dealroom.co, 2022) shows that CEE start-ups reached a combined value of 190 billion euros in 2022. The value itself has increased by four times over the last five years, and a total of 34 so-called 'unicorns' have been created in the CEE region so far. In 2021 alone, 12 start-ups were declared unicorns. Companies are currently achieving unicorn status almost three times faster than 10 years before.

CEE Start-up Ecosystems

Significant potential, unique local entrepreneurship, and innovativeness as well as growing interest by international investors has made Central and Eastern European countries take a number of steps to improve their existing systems to support start-ups in order to make them more business and investor friendly and to encourage their growth, international expansion, and global success. In order to assess the quality of CEE start-up ecosystems, an interesting methodology has been applied by a team of scholars from the SGH Warsaw School of Economics. In a report published in 2022 (Chłoń-Domińczak, 2022), the authors developed and studied 10 factors that determine the quality of ecosystems and the quality of the

support offered to start-ups. The factors analysed by the SGH team include: 1) Social and Economic Development; 2) the Tax System; 3) Intellectual Property Protection; 4) Academic Entrepreneurship; 5) Government Agencies; 6) start-up Accelerators; 7) Regulatory Sandbox; 8) Binding Joint start-ups and Network Organisations; 9) Venture Capital Fund; and 10) start-up success in terms of visibility and stakeholder awareness in the start-up support system.

A detailed assessment of the factors that make up the entrepreneurship support system in CEE countries and a detailed assessment of each country compared to CEE countries are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: A Detailed Evaluation of Factors Comprising Start-up Support Systems in CEE Countries and an Aggregate Evaluation of Each Country Compared to the CEE

Factor	Weight	Albania	Bulgaria	Croatia	Czech Republic	Estonia	Lithuania	Latvia	Poland	Romania	Slovakia	Slovenia	Ukraine	Hungary
Development	15.45%	0.46	0.62	0.46	0.62	0.46	0.77	0.46	0.77	0.62	0.62	0.62	0.46	0.46
Taxes	10.00%	0.10	0.30	0.20	0.30	0.50	0.40	0.40	0.20	0.30	0.30	0.30	0.10	0.20
IP	5.45%	0.16	0.11	0.11	0.22	0.27	0.22	0.22	0.16	0.05	0.05	0.27	0.16	0.05
Academic entrepreneurship	10.00%	0.10	0.40	0.30	0.50	0.50	0.40	0.30	0.50	0.20	0.40	0.40	0.20	0.30
Gov. Agencies	6.36%	0.06	0.06	0.06	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.06	0.06	0.25	0.06	0.13
Accelerators	14.55%	0.29	0.58	0.15	0.58	0.73	0.73	0.58	0.58	0.29	0.44	0.58	0.29	0.44
Sandboxes	1.82%	0.02	0.05	0.02	0.05	0.05	0.09	0.09	0.07	0.05	0.07	0.05	0.02	0.09
Clusters	13.64%	0.14	0.41	0.55	0.55	0.68	0.68	0.55	0.55	0.41	0.68	0.55	0.41	0.41
VC	18.18%	0.18	0.18	0.18	0.73	0.91	0.36	0.18	0.55	0.18	0.18	0.18	0.18	0.18
Start-up successes	4.55%	0.05	0.09	0.05	0.14	0.23	0.14	0.14	0.23	0.18	0.09	0.14	0.05	0.18
Total evaluation	100%	1.56	2.81	2.07	3.94	4.59	4.05	3.17	3.86	2.35	2.90	3.35	1.94	2.45

Source: author's own study by the SGH Warsaw School of Economics own development prepared in order to determine the weights of individual criteria in the whole of the factors constituting the examined systems of supporting start-ups in CEE, using a panel of experts using the Delphi method and the binary comparison technique.

A team of SGH researchers adopted three ranks for the ecosystem that support start-ups to reflect their level of advancement in this area which, namely, are: "leader", "rising star", and "developing". It was agreed that in order for a given system to gain the title of "leader" in the surveyed group of countries in this year's edition of the survey, its overall rating should be at least 80% of the possible number of points on a scale from 1 to 5 (4.00 and more). The "rising star" in the overall assessment had to get from 60% up to 79.99% of the possible number of points on a scale of 1 to 5 (from 3.00 to 3.995). Systems supporting start-ups whose combined rating was less than 60% of the possible number of points (below 3.00) have been classified as "developing" in this year's edition of the survey. Based on the results of the study, two systems of supporting start-ups with the rank of "leader" were identified, those two systems being Estonia and Lithuania. The four systems classified as "rising stars" were the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovenia, and Latvia, and there were seven systems belonging to the "developing" category: Slovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Croatia, Ukraine, and Albania.

Ecosystem Start-ups: The Case of Poland

Poland's ecosystem for start-ups is one of the fastest developing in the CEE region. In the last few years, it has undergone a profound transformation resulting in an extensive network of young technology companies and institutions which provide support to the aforementioned start-ups. Forward-looking EU and national policies aimed at innovation stimulation are the very foundation of the Polish ecosystem. In addition, over the last few decades, Poland's economy has been developing quickly, which has attracted local and foreign stakeholders to invest in innovations. As outlined in a Deloitte report entitled: "Diagnosis of the start-up ecosystem in Poland" (Deloitte, 2016a), Poland offers significant potential for start-up development. It is forecast that, by 2023, the added value generated by start-ups will reach PLN 2.2 billion and be accompanied by 50,000 new jobs. The most important factor here is the leading position of the Polish ICT industry – an unquestionable leader in Europe. High-investment potential, well-educated human capital, and foreign language fluency are only a few of the reasons why Poland enjoys the highest potential for the development of a competitive environment of innovation development.

Since Poland's accession to the European Union, the long-term development of the innovativeness of the Polish economy and the R&D sector has been co-financed by the State through EU Structural Funds

(SF). The financing has been provided based on the Regional Innovation Systems (RIS), smart specialisation strategies, and regional programmes.

The implementation of a systemic approach to innovation (RIS) has seen proven, positive effects on closing the innovation gap, diminishing risk related to new innovative investments, supporting the acquisition of various types of knowledge, and enabling interactive learning and the exchange of best practices. Furthermore, it has strengthened the competitiveness of those regions for which innovation, knowledge, and the learning process are essential. RIS also supports the adaptation of regional economies to the globalisation process.

In recent years, new state institutions, programs, and instruments have been established, further complemented by development accelerators, business incubators, investors, and research institutions which form the ecosystem fostering the development of new technologies and products. In 2016, the Polish government launched the largest program for new, innovative companies in Central and Eastern Europe, called "Start in Poland". The program is a so-called "umbrella" for governmental support for start-ups. "Start in Poland" includes various components, such as Scale Up, Poland Prize, Elektro Scale Up, Start Platforms, GovTech, R&D relief, IP Box,[4] and others.

Poland Prize, Scale Up Start in Poland, and Start-up Platforms are flagship programs offered by the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development (PARP) within the Start in Poland framework. The Poland Prize initiative has a special focus on preparing foreign start-ups to operate in Poland. Six established operators are looking for start-ups from Europe, Asia, and North America. As a pilot initiative, the Scale Up program allows start-ups to develop more quickly thanks to short-term mentoring and financial support. Most of the activities are financed through EU funds.

The quality of legal regulations in the Polish start-up ecosystem is constantly improving. Nevertheless, a lack of transparency combined with the complexity of the tax system, and the insufficient speed of setting up a business are the major challenges facing young, innovative enterprises (Delloite, 2016). In 2016, tax reliefs were introduced in addition to existing R&D subsidies with the goal of attracting foreign investors to situate their businesses in Poland. Legal solutions conducive to a start-up-friendly environment also include regulations pertaining to a simple joint-stock company and regulatory sandbox for FinTech start-ups.

[4] IP Box provides CIT and PIT at the level of 5% for those companies that commercialise the R&D works they have developed. The new tax relief completes the entire cycle of innovation – from research to the sale of products or services based on research results.

Fourteen Special Economic Zones (SEZ) have been established to attract investments offering tax exemptions and infrastructure for business development. An additional incentive for companies to allocate more funds to R&D activities is, *inter alia*, the Act on certain forms of supporting innovative activities (Journal of Laws No. 179, item 1484). Both the bill and its amendments introduce new instruments to strengthen innovation and establish preferences for innovative enterprises – including the possibility of financing investments in new technology and launching the production of new products or modernising existing production based on this technology with a technological loan. Moreover, it allows for the potential cancellation of a part of the loan (40-65%) in the form of a technological bonus paid after the project is completed. In addition, the aforementioned act enables entrepreneurs to receive the status of 'research and development' centres.

An issue of key importance to the development of start-ups is financing. Securing financing is a major challenge faced by start-ups and, for a long time, the Polish ecosystem did not attract a sufficient amount of private capital, resulting in the fact that over half of Polish start-ups have financed themselves using their own funds (Cegielska, 2017). Bearing in mind the limitation in private capital investments, extensive state financing schemes for development of start-up ecosystem have been put in place. For several years, the role of the dominant entities in the state financing of start-ups has been played by two state institutions: the State Development Fund (PFR), and the National Centre for Research and Development (NCBR) – a government agency created to support the development of innovation in Poland. Within the PFR, dedicated investment funds have been established under the umbrella of PFR Ventures (operating within the Group of the State Development Fund) which is the largest Fund of Funds in Central and Eastern Europe. Funds, such as PFR Starter FIZ (PFR Starter FIZ – established for innovative companies at their earliest stage of development), PFR Biznest FIZ (PFR Biznest FIZ – established as a fund of funds; co-invest with business angels in start-ups at an early stage of development), PFR Open Innovation FIZ (PFR Open Innovation Fund focuses on SMEs implementing technological projects under the open innovation formula), PFR NCBR CVC (the PFR NCBR CVC Fund is the first Polish Fund-of-Funds investing in CVC & VC funds), and PFR KOFFI FIZ (the PFR KOFFI FIZ Fund is dedicated to small and medium-sized enterprises at the stage of growth, and development/expansion) provides capital to young, innovative companies at all stages of their development.

The NCBR has been offering assistance and financing to entrepreneurs, originators, universities and investors through programs such as BRIdge

Alfa, BRIdge Classic, BRIdge Mentor, BRIdge VC, NCBR CVC, as well as the TDJ Pitango Ventures fund. In the context of financing, one has to say that Poland is the most important market for private equity (PE) funds investing in Central and Eastern Europe. The Polish start-up ecosystem is also famous for a large network of incubators and accelerators, including a high number of technological parks. They offer a broad variety of support tools such as mentoring, financial support, networking opportunities, access to the infrastructure, working space, etc.

EU funds are also of growing importance to start-ups looking for capital. Every eighth start-up has benefited from EU funds, mainly in the form of EU subsidies. Almost 90% of start-ups that have benefited from EU funds admitted that without EU support, their projects would not have been implemented or would have been implemented to a much lesser extent (Krajowy Punkt Kontaktowy, N.D.). Thanks to EU programs such as the Sectoral Operational Program Increasing the Competitiveness of Enterprises (2004–2006), the Operational Program Innovative Economy (2007–2013),[5] and the Smart Growth Operational Program (2014–2020), Poland has been able to unlock its innovative potential. The operational programs are primarily aimed at the development of the Polish economy based on innovative enterprises. In this respect, they comply with the goals outlined in the EU Lisbon Strategy and the Europe 2020 Strategy. Polish start-ups can benefit from support under the structural funds, primarily because EU funds are dedicated to investments conducive to economic growth and the creation of new jobs.

Since 2004, the implementation of EU operational programs with regard to innovation has undergone a profound evolution. A new approach has been implemented according to which entrepreneurs have been allowed and encouraged to apply simultaneously for funding under various financing schemes. Furthermore, programs such as Operational Program Innovative Economy have been designed so as to encourage enterprises to implement new technologies, business ideas, and innovations in operational and strategic management as well as to stimulate cooperation between businesses and the research sector.

It is worth mentioning that there are already several programs at the EU level dedicated to supporting start-ups. They include, *inter alia*:

- Start-up Europe, aimed at networking opportunities for high-tech start-ups, scale-ups, investors, accelerators, corporate networks, universities, and media;

[5] In the OP IE alone, the allocation was EUR 9,711,629,740, including EUR 8,254,885,280 from EU funds (ERDF), and EUR 1,456,744,460 from the state budget.

- Start-up Europe Partnership: an integrated pan-European open innovation platform that helps the best EU scale-ups to grow;
- InvestEU Portal: a single, EU-wide database of investment opportunities.

In July 2022, the European Commission adopted a "New European Innovation Agenda" (Communication from the Commission, 2022), which aims at stimulating technological innovation and start-up activity across Europe. The main goals defined by the Commission include: improving access to finance for European start-ups and scale-ups; improving conditions to allow innovators to experiment with new ideas through regulatory sandboxes; creating so-called 'regional innovation valleys'; attracting and retaining talent in Europe; increasing support for female innovators and innovating with start-up employees' stock options, and improving the policy framework through clearer terminology, indicators and data sets, as well as policy support to Member States (Communication from the Commission, 2022).

Conclusions

Despite many incentives and innovative solutions implemented in Poland, much still remains to be done. In 2006, a Deloitte analysis showed that the innovation rate of small and medium-sized Polish enterprises was not improving. Support from Structural Funds, which was to stimulate patent activity, unfortunately did not bring about expected results. Being aware of all the weaknesses and deficiencies, one has to keep in mind that the Polish start-up ecosystem has a high potential to become the most attractive environment for entrepreneurs and investors not only in Central and Eastern Europe, as combined venture capital investment in CEE has doubled since 2020. The region is on track to break its yearly venture capital investment record and raise €6.2B.

Post-pandemic unpredictability, inflation, rising interest rates, rising wages in the high-technology sector, increasing global competition for talent, the threat of a global recession, and the falling start-up valuations will remain a challenge for the sector, making it difficult to attract capital.

In the longer perspective, however, development trends seem to be more stable. Further progress in innovation, digitisation, and technology will be the driving forces of start-ups and may contribute to their more expedient growth.

In order to develop a more effective, competitive ecosystem for start-ups, several solutions could be implemented. Firstly, the efficiency of

work needs to be improved. Secondly, the government shall ensure the stability of the business environment to facilitate the growth of domestic companies – including start-ups – and to stimulate the inflow of foreign investments to high-technology areas. Thirdly, research polices and their implementation shall focus on strengthening scientific networks and scientific and industrial consortia. Fourthly, the regional approach based on the smart specialisation of the regions shall be more pronounced. Regional Innovation Strategies shall contribute to the establishment of the regions of knowledge. Next, as CEE and Polish start-ups have developed to a great extent as regards their personal finances, an important question arises regarding how to ensure the strong and sustainable presence of international VC investors in Poland and in the CEE region. Any consequent strengthening of the regional VC community and attracting US investors would allow start-ups to grow and expand their business globally.

And, finally, Polish institutions and stakeholders should strengthen their involvement in European programs.

Start-ups could become a key element and a driving force of an innovative economy in Poland and in the region. For this to happen, they need an effective, mature ecosystem comprising of a stable regulatory system attracting foreign investors and a network of government support institutions, venture capital investors, and research institutes.

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Poland's Experience and Influence in Shaping the Western Balkans' Future

Abstract
Every experience, if used positively, can have a positive impact. That is why it is so important for Poland's experience and experiences to be presented and used by the Western Balkans mostly as a guide towards peace, stability, and reconciliation. An overview of Polish history, the use of common diplomacy, and the need and want for compromise can serve as a guide for solving similar neighbourly relations.

Keywords: Poland, Western Balkans, Experience

Polish–German Historic Overview

Poland's conflict with Germany had its beginnings in 1815 and the Congress of Vienna, as well as the negative influence of 1848's revolution which affected the borders between the countries. In the same year, the Prussian government wanted to create a border between Germany and Poland, but this idea was blocked by nationalist tensions and resulted in a Polish uprising. All of this changed during German unification in 1862, and especially during the assimilation and exclusion policies applied in the 1870s by the Prussian government against the Poles. Furthermore, when the war began in 1914, the Central Powers (consisting of the German Empire, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and the Kingdom of Bulgaria) and Russia wanted to gain Polish support by promising liberation and political recognition. Austria had other plans, however, as she wanted to unite Russian Poland with Galicia under Austro-Polish influence. At that point in time, Germany had no aspirations, especially not of a territorial nature, but rather it wanted to return Russian Poland to

the tsar in exchange for peace, but the tsar refused this offer. So, in 1916, the Germans' interests began to change towards securing their strategic position by creating bulwark states from non-Russian lands in order to use as shields (Boysen, 2014).

Contrary to the Central Powers' methods, Poland tried to establish its international policy based on a policy of non-aggression and by signing treaties with Russia in 1932 and with Germany in 1934. It also attempted to use the friendship card with the Baltic states along with Latvia, Estonia, Hungary, and Romania, but most of them kept their distance due to the fact that they did not want to lose their independence and/or did not want to be used as what could be described as buffer zones in a game that they did not want to play. In 1938, during the München crisis, Poland shifted its strategy and undertook action to regain a small territory near Cieszyn. In 1939, Poland's policy for balance between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union collapsed, which forced the country to take steps to correct its defence and subsequently began to prepare for an attack from the East *and* from the West (Jablonski, 2019). On March 21st, 1939, the then French Prime Minister É. Daladier, and then British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain discussed the possibility of forming a joint front with Russia and Poland for the purposes of acting against Germany. France agreed, but Russia was sceptical, and Poland vetoed the agreement because they feared Russia more than they did Germany. To complicate the situation further, the Allied forces in the Versailles Treaty had detached Memel from East Prussia and placed it in a protectorate. Lithuania proceeded to seize Memel which was a German city and, on March 22nd, 1939, it returned it to Germany. Poland agreed that the return of Memel to Germany would not present an issue for Poland, but what caused the conflict between Germany and Poland was the so-called 'Free City of Danzig'. Danzig was the main and most important port on the Vistula River. It was inhabited by a mostly German population, with a Polish minority of just 3%. The Treaty of Versailles converted Danzig from that of a German provincial capital into a League of Nations protectorate, but with Polish influence and benefits. The citizens of Danzig wanted to be part of Germany and not Poland, which was seeking to control Danzig. And so, in 1938, Germany presented a proposal for a settlement of the Danzig question. Hitler would go on to allow Germany to annex Danzig and construct a highway and a railroad to East Prussia and, in return, Poland would be granted a permanent free port in Danzig and the right to build its own highway and railroad, with the city becoming a free market for Polish goods with no customs checks. Germany would recognise the German-Polish frontier, which would include Upper Silesia. This provision was,

in reality, hugely important since the Versailles Treaty had given Poland much more territory than Germany wanted to disclaim. The Versailles Treaty gave Poland a large swathe of territory in West Prussia and Western Posen which were German territories, and Germany was even willing to renounce those territories in the interests of German-Polish cooperation. Some Polish diplomats believed that Germany's proposal was sincere and had the required basis for making an agreement, but, on March 26th, 1939, Polish Ambassador Józef Lipski rejected the proposal and issued a threat stating that should Germany have any aspirations towards Danzig, it would mean war (Wear, 2019). The tensions did not stop there; after World War II, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union intended to determine postwar borders in Europe. They discussed this issue during the Potsdam conference in 1945 which resulted in the concluding of the Potsdam agreement. The Yalta proceedings concerning Poland included a provision stating that the eastern frontier of Poland should follow the Curzon Line, and that it must receive accessions of territory, but the final Polish-German border had not been confirmed. Poland's western border was included into the Potsdam agreement with the delimitation of the western border to await the peace settlement in order to have a final decision on a common border (Marczuk, 2017).

The Polish-German Reconciliation Process

Finally, on 17th June, 1991, Poland's conflict with Germany was concluded, and 2022 marks 31 years since the signing of the Polish-German Treaty of Good Neighbourly and Friendly Cooperation. The Treaty was anticipated from a Border Treaty, which is how the two countries reconciled, and it resolved the Polish-German border conflict which had been one of the most challenging problems in bilateral relations. The treaty by itself was not the end game; it consisted of a package consisting of bilateral agreements that discussed areas of concern such as the regulation of past issues, financial and economic relations which had become a priority, and the establishment of an institutional network for future understanding. The collapse of communism had created the foundation for the creation of an institutional framework for normalisation and reconciliation as well as the idea for a so-called "community of interests" in which the two countries share common values along with cooperation as key factors to stability and prosperity. What this "community of interests" means is that when Warsaw needed German support in its economic transformation and integration with the European Community and NATO, it received Germany's help, because Germany wanted to prove the credibility of

its actions. Therefore, The Polish-German Treaty of Good Neighbourly and Friendly Cooperation laid the foundation for future cooperation in different fields such as security, economy, the environment, and youth exchange. It also regulated the question of Polish citizens of German origin as well as the German community in Poland, and it was awarded minority status with the use of their language and culture. Germany also obliged itself to support Poland's membership in the European Union. Therefore, if the questions raised regarding the German-Polish reconciliation are posed in the case of reconciliation in the Western Balkans, the differences are obvious and similarities very general but also recognisable. The two processes differ in context, time, the characteristics of the conflicts, the efforts to reconcile, the actors involved, the dimensions, and the levels of institutionalisation (Szpala et al., 2021). But this process can still serve as a guide and as a success story for reconciliation and resolving bilateral issues. Bilateral issues, incidentally, which the Western Balkans still have.

Poland as an Example for the Western Balkans

Bearing in mind the above, another question is to be posed as to how Poland can influence and/or be a guide for the Western Balkans.

The Western Balkans are, to use the idiom, still considered a powder keg, and filled with metaphorical gun powder that could easily be ignited by a single, wayward spark. Although we have to acknowledge that the region has been stable in the last couple of years, especially since it synchronised its purpose to be part of the EU, security concerns are still very much present. And this security factor serves as a frame to Poland's foreign policy approach towards the Western Balkans. After the collapse of communism and the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the countries of the Visegrad Group (V4) went through a period of peaceful economic development and political stability. And the former Yugoslav countries went through a turbulent period, with some of them having a more challenging time than the others. Slovenia underwent a prompt consolidation and stabilisation, whereas Bosnia and Kosovo had internationally supervised independence with ongoing turbulence, and North Macedonia underwent a civil war and so on. But these turbulent paths may serve as a reason for Poland to change its foreign policy and also serve as a guide to stability and prosperity in the region. In 2010, Gromadzki and Balcer underlined seven arguments regarding why Poland should be present in the region:

- A successful integration of the Balkans would strengthen the EU's position;

- Poland's Eastern policy is dependent on developments in the Balkans;
- Energy cooperation with the Balkans is fundamental for the EU's energy security;
- The Common Security and Defence Policy is intertwined with the Western Balkans;
- An enhancement of Poland's involvement could win new allies in the EU;
- The introduction of a new dimension to Poland's Foreign Policy would challenge the argument that Poland is only "Eastern" oriented (Domaradzki et al., 2018).

All of these points are, indeed, to the point, and Poland's perception of European integration towards the Western Balkans has changed, but the EU's soft power has weakened, and the current global challenges are becoming a great burden. Therefore, any negative scenarios in the Western Balkans would have a direct impact not only on the Polish economy and the country's political position, but also on the EU. Furthermore, Poland's Eastern policy offers experience and expertise that can be implemented in the Western Balkan region, especially because the Balkans remain a geopolitical battlefield where the interests of the West, the EU, and the US clash with Russian determination. The Western Balkans' potential disorientation from the EU path could lead to political destabilisation and a re-emergence of national and ethnic tensions. But, on the other hand, the successful completion of the Western Balkans' integration process would mean stability and increased security for the Visegrad Group *and* its neighbourhood. It would consolidate the region around shared values and the principles of cooperation and stability. It would strengthen the EU's integrity and eliminate those influences from Russia, Saudi Arabia, China, and Turkey which are already having an effect in the region due to the fact that it holds geopolitical and strategic importance. In that respect, the economic potential of the Western Balkans, along with its stability and prosperity, represent emerging opportunities for Poland itself (Domaradzki et al., 2018).

Moreover, Poland will not serve only as an example but as a supporter for further EU enlargement. Why a supporter, you may ask? Well, the answer to this question must relate to both values and experience, along with the current world's geopolitical situation. The countries of the Western Balkans contain a specific geographical, historical, and cultural part of Europe. Moreover, all previous enlargements have led to an increase in the importance of the EU as a global actor and have led to positive developments within the community itself. Also, the success of

Poland's transformation is an important example for the Western Balkans (Szynkowski, 2019). Poland's foreign policy towards the Western Balkans not only influences its interests in the region but also determines its position in the European Union. As a large EU member, Poland has to pay more attention to the Balkans than it has done so far, because until now it has been more of a passive player in the region. The region is important from the point of view of European security, the formulation of a joint foreign policy, and the preservation of the Union (Gniazdowski, 2018). Poland has a good reputation in the Balkans, and is perceived as a success story of political and economic transformation. In addition, the Western Balkan countries need advocates in Europe (Żornaczuk, 2012). And Poland can be classed as such an advocate since it has committed its foreign policy agenda to promote Poland internationally, to promote enlargement as a strategic project, and supports all efforts to help Western Balkan states fulfil their aspirations to join the EU (Griessler, 2018).

Conclusions

The Polish/German reconciliation process can serve not only as an example but also as a guide for the Western Balkan countries on how to bring about reconciliation, support peace, and ensure stability. Poland can also help in navigating and promoting EU values so that the Western Balkans do not stray from the correct path of integrating in the EU. Poland can also be a promoter and a friend on the inside in order for the EU to realise the importance of the region for the EU itself, because there are other actors who are more than confident enough to take action either to misguide or to use the region to their own advantage.

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The Great Power Game in the Balkans

Abstract
The Balkans, mainly in the sense of the post-Yugoslavian states, but, in wider terms, also including Bulgaria, Romania, and Greece, traditionally known as "Europe's underbelly", a "powder keg", a "kettle" or even a "minefield", are at the top of the agenda of the Great Powers once again. This is, it is argued in this study, mostly due to a new power confrontation and strategic rivalry or so-called Power Politics, initiated by the Trump administration in the US and, of course, the stunning rise of China. As result, we have a competition between four major players in the region, namely, the US, China, Russia, and the EU. Türkiye as a traditional power, is of course visible there as well, but is not as crucial. At stake is the question of who will prevail in the Balkans: NATO and the EU and the value-based order, or the new, non-liberal camp consisting of China and Russia? This the crux of the matter on the extant global scene, with the Balkans being one of the most important front lines of this so-called New Cold War, as the current situation is more and more frequently being described.

Keywords: Balkans, United States, USA, China, Russia, European Union, Great Powers, Power Politics, Global Order, Value-Based Order, New Global Order

Introduction – The Big Geopolitical Picture

As most people are aware, in the post-Soviet world, that is, the era immediately after the dismantling of the USSR as of 1992, there was for sometime "the unipolar moment", to use a famous and discerning term from Charles Krauhammer (Krauthammer, 1990). For a generation or so, at least until the great depression and economic-financial crisis of 2008, we had an omnipotent supremacy of one great power in the form of the

USA. No one questioned this state of affairs, even if there was no new treaty of Vienna or Versailles to confirm it in any legal terms.

Initially, in response to the new circumstances, even Boris Yeltsin's post-Soviet Russian Federation accepted a double package of liberal democracy in political terms and the neo-liberal Washington Consensus in the economic sphere, all under the umbrella of "the end of history", as was coined by Francis Fukuyama (Fukuyama, 1992). For more than two decades, almost the entire world seemed to share an American dominated, liberal, value-based order along with so-called 'market fundamentalism', that is, the absolute, unrestrained domination of market forces under the umbrella of what was also American-dominated, but supported and expanded formally by certain Bretton Woods institutions (i.e., the IMF and the World Bank).

However, what was for a long time neglected, especially in the Western world, along with being crucial and meaningful, was the fact that the only major country which rejected the liberal double package was China, choosing instead its own solutions, namely by continuing the autocratic model of the Communist Party's domination in political terms, while joining the globalisation processes and adapting a so-called "developmental state" model of development to its own requirements and circumstances' end. Meanwhile, the Balkans were excluded from this transformation, being engaged in the three consecutive wars in the Western Balkans (understood mainly as the post-Yugoslavian states plus Albania): the Serbo-Croatian war (1991–1992), the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1993–1995), and the war in Kosovo (1999).

What we observed later, from the beginning of the 21st century, was a so-called "power shift", which is usually and frequently described as the situation after the economic and financial crisis of 2008, which, as a result, brought about a new and important category of states, known since then as "the emerging markets". They include former Third World countries, starting from those most populated such as China, India, and Indonesia. And it is those countries which brought about a new dynamic to the world economy thereafter, bringing some 67% of global GDP growth between 2011 and 2021, and providing 49% of global GDP (World Economics, 2021). A further shift of economic power in their direction is widely expected (Tanudiredja, 2017).

One important factor is missing in this respect in what is mainly Western-dominated discourse. Namely, that the power shift should be counted and recognised not since 2008, as it is used to being, but rather from 2001, when the US engaged itself in an ISAF mission in Afghanistan, while at exactly the same time, in December 2001, China joined the WTO and started to

grow, and has continued to grow with great, double-digit speed since then. It was already then for the first time, when one could detected a power shift occurring from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Thus, 2008 was the second moment, when, once again, and to a larger extent this time, the movement from the Atlantic to the Pacific was confirmed.[1] The third moment came at the end of 2017/early 2018, when Donald Trump signed off on the new military and security strategies of the US, and whereupon both China and Russia, although later only China (until February 24th, 2022) were designated as strategic competitors and rivals. That was also confirmed in March 2018, when President Trump initiated a trade (and customs) war with the outside world, starting with China. This was a farewell moment for the former policy of 'engagement', which started with Henry Kissinger's and, later, Richard Nixon's famous visits to the People's Republic of China (PRC). Since then, we have seen the birth of a new era – that of 'strategic competition', mainly between the US and PRC, but also, with visibly growing intensity, between China and the EU. It is visible especially after the Russian aggression in Ukraine in February 2022, which is definitely not only a fourth chapter in the power shift, but also and almost certainly the beginning of a new global order, sometimes described as multi-polar, and sometimes – a view which is shared by the author of this text – a bipolar order again, when all the world, with the Balkans included, has to respond to the clash of two power centres, or political (and ideological) camps – one liberal, Western, and US-dominated, versus one that is non-liberal, autocratic, and dominated by China with Russian support.

Incredibly importantly, the latter was convincingly confirmed by a joint China-Russia communiqué dated February 4th, 2022, when this division line or axis between liberal and non-liberal (autocratic) forces was precisely described. As it openly stated in the document: "Today, the world is going through momentous changes, and humanity is entering a new era of rapid development and profound transformation". And later, in an explanation of the content of this "new era", the signing sides declared, without name-checking, that "Some actors representing but the minority on an international scale continue to advocate unilateral approaches to addressing international issues and resort to force; they interfere in the internal affairs of other states, infringing their legitimate rights and interests, and incite contradictions, differences and confrontation, thus hampering the development and progress of mankind, against the opposition from the international community" (President of Russia,

[1] Proof of it being a famous "pivot" to Asia-Pacific region, inaugurated by the Obama administration, when the US was trying, at least verbally, to adjust itself to the new circumstances and catch-up with the ever-stronger China and the region.

2022). An open declaration to revise the existing and US-dominated, value-based order has come into being.

Since then, and especially since the Russian aggression visited upon Ukraine, every country and region in the world has had to adjust itself to this new situation. Of course, due to the existence of the main axis between the Atlantic and the Pacific, the Western Balkans are not of the utmost importance, or as important as the Ukraine or the Donbas, or the South-China Sea or Taiwan front-lines on this new, global-power battlefield. However, a power game of great magnitude happening there is easily detected.

The Role of the Great Powers in the Balkans

As we know from history, the Balkans have seen successive crises and disputes in modern times, including their key role in both World Wars. Traditionally, the great powers in the Balkans were Turkey (or Türkiye, to use the term preferred now by Ankara) and the Western European Powers, starting with the Habsburg empire (Bagheri, Bagheri, 2022). This is not the case any longer, because even though Türkiye is very visible in the region, especially in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo or Northern Macedonia, it is not a global power by definition, just one of the emerging markets (and powers) without a leading role. Thus, in this analysis, and probably not only this one, only four powers are active participants in the region: the USA, China, the EU, and Russia – a declining power in fact, but a traditionally important player in the region (not only in political and economic sense, but also in the ideological and religious dimension – namely that of the Orthodox church).

The United States of America

The United States of America was the most important player at the end of the second Balkan war in the 1990s, practically imposing by its political and diplomatic activity the Dayton accords, and an even more visible actor during the third war, being directly involved in the clash in Kosovo. The latter is especially etched into people's minds in Serbia, where both US and NATO are blamed for direct intervention (*inter alia*, as evidenced by the infamous bombing of the Chinese Embassy building in Belgrade in 1999, or the removal of the Milosevic regime). Meanwhile, Kosovo's legal status remains a bone of contention and a constant thorn in US/Serbian relations.

The situation in the region only changed later, when the US authorities initiated their war on terror in 2001, in the wake of World Trade Center attack. Crucial was president George W. Bush's speech

in Thessaloniki in 2003, when he famously – for the countries in the region – stated that: "The future of the Balkans is within the EU" (GPO, 2003). At the same time, in the no less famous Thessaloniki Declaration, after the EU/Western Balkans Summit on 21st June, 2003, the possibility for the countries of the Western Balkans to join both the EU and the NATO alliance were stipulated. As was stated in the communiqué: "We all highly value the close co-operation between the EU and the US and NATO in the region, within the framework of UN Resolutions, as well as the role of other international organisations and financial institutions operating in the area. We encourage close co-ordination of their activities, which they used as an opportunity" (European Union, 2003). It is not surprising then, that every country of the region was pressing not only for membership in the EU, but also NATO. As we know, Croatia and Albania joined the alliance in 2009, Montenegro in 2017, and, finally, North Macedonia in 2020, after the previous Prespa Agreement of 2017 between Skopje and Athens terminated the bilateral differences which were a cardinal obstacle for North Macedonia to be officially accepted as a partner in the international organisations and in the international arena. Both Athens and Skopje agreed that The Second Party's official name from then on would be "The Republic of North Macedonia" or, in short, "North Macedonia" (Hellenic Republic, 2018). While North Macedonia's EU membership has been under question since then, first of all due to EU pressure, and most specifically French president Emmanuel Macron's position, the *sine qua non* criteria to join are the clear rules of enlargement (Grammatikakis, 2020). However, NATO membership has thus been enabled – and put into reality already in 2020.

The European Union

In many respects, a crucial document of the European Institutions concerning the issues in the Balkans, most importantly (from their perspective) regarding the question of enlargement, was a comprehensive document of the European Council published at the end of its Thessaloniki Summit in June 2003 (Council of European Union, 2003). It was issued a year before the first enlargement of the EU to the East, to former post-Soviet territories. Finally, it was time to facilitate the Union's capacity to deal with the region after three brutal wars and to look to the future. Complicated issues such as those pertaining to visas, asylum, the management of external borders, the return of illegal migrants, forming partnerships and relations with external countries, financial resources, burden-sharing mechanisms, broad economic policy, and employment guidelines were dealt with. Separately, the issues of the EU's enlargement

to Cyprus and the Western Balkans were discussed, with the stipulation of the "full and effective support" of their European perspective.

However, the so-called 'Thessaloniki Promise' has yet to be fulfilled, and for many reasons. On the one hand, the EU is the largest investor in the region of Western Balkans (some 70%, as opposed to China's 8%), while economic and trade relations are thriving. On the other hand, the visible ambivalence of the EU Member States concerning further enlargement can be easily detected, with Germany and Austria on one side pushing for it, whereas France is strongly against it. It was visible even in recent EU/Western Balkans Summit documents in Kraj, Slovenia in October 2021, (ESO, 2021) where the EU "reaffirmed the European perspective of the Western Balkans region", and once again supported the enlargement process for each of its countries, simultaneously supporting the connectivity and twin (Green & digital) transition of the region, but, at the same time, several conditions were enumerated, concerning some "weak points" of the region, such as the rule of law, the freedom of the media and judiciary, the protection of minorities, along with corruption and even organised crime as the issues hampering the accession process. Instead, as the crucial condition of credible enlargement, the issue of "shared responsibilities" was raised, including "fair conditionality", and especially "predictability" and the "commitment of both sides to implement the process, fulfil promises, implement reforms, and show unambiguous dedication" to further enlargement (to quote European Commission documents and other European institutions).

No question, then, that the situation and position of the Western Balkans, and especially with Serbia strengthening its relations with China and Russia, or Montenegro partially in Chinese hands economically, were even further complicated after Russia's aggression and subsequent eruption of the war in Ukraine. Since then, our attention, for obvious reasons, has been focused on Ukraine, and not the Western Balkans. Also, the announcement coming out of Ukraine and Moldova regarding their candidate status for the EU were seen differently by both sides. This announcement was praised by European Council President Charles Michel as a "unique and historic moment", while in the Western Balkans it was widely met with disappointment (BBC, 2022). According to Prime Minister of North Macedonia Dimitar Kovačevski, the decision by the EU to grant the Ukraine and Moldova candidate status was "a great problem and deep blow to the credibility of the European Union" in his country and the whole region (Deutsche Welle, 2022). Skopje was more hopeful, but cautious; at the end of June 2022, Bulgaria's parliament voted to lift its own two-year-old veto on membership negotiations for neighbouring

North Macedonia after apparently reaching a bilateral agreement on terms for the country's accession to the EU. In any case, the situation in North Macedonia, indeed, the whole region, is leading other countries to come to certain conclusions as regards EU enlargement, according to which "EU enlargement is broken in the Balkans" (Coakley, 2022). The accession process with the six Western Balkan states differs between the countries (de Jong, 2022). Serbia has met one of the EU's main demands through its cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). However, since negotiations started in 2014, the EU has seen little progress on the rule of law and press freedom. Montenegro, which applied for candidate status in 2010, appears to be the closest to EU membership as the EU is positive about the development of the country's development. In addition, the country also recently pledged to stop issuing so-called golden passports to people from outside the Union. North Macedonia's negotiation talks, however, have been severely impacted by neighbouring countries. Greece had blocked talks for years over a name dispute which finally led, in 2018, to an official change of the country's name to North Macedonia. Also, in recent years, Bulgaria had been continuing to block the negotiations over historical and cultural and language objections, focusing on North Macedonia. Fortunately, a recent decision by the Bulgarian parliament has resulted in forward movement.

The EU institutions and authorities are positive about Albania's potential democratic development and reduction in crime even if, as we are constantly reminded, economic instability and corruption in the country are still prevalent. Currently, the most complicated case probably seems to be that of Bosnia and Herzegovina which is to become an official candidate for membership. To achieve that, its constitution must be fundamentally changed, as Bosnia has a deep distinction between its Bosnian-Croatian and its Serb elements. A recent development in Bosnia and Herzegovina has plunged the country into a constitutional crisis which threatens not only its territorial integrity but also its European perspectives. Kosovo was also presented with potential candidacy in 2008. In this case, as it is with the whole region, the split between the EU Member States as regards Kosovo's status seems to be even deeper, as the country is backed by Germany's and Italy's leaders, but countries such as Greece and Spain are yet to formally recognise the country's independence.

As a result, as at mid-2022, the issues of enlargement for Serbia and Montenegro are stalled, further negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia are on the waiting list, while the constantly delicate Kosovo and an again-volatile Bosnia and Herzegovina are still waiting for an invitation to the EU. And, once again, perceptions were different in Berlin

as they were in some other European capitals. As Chancellor Olaf Sholz said after the announcement of the granting of candidate status for Ukraine and Moldova: "For almost 20 years, the countries and the citizens of the Western Balkans have been waiting for the opportunity to become members of the European Union". As an example of good intent, Scholz even mentioned that North Macedonia had even changed its name to further its aspirations of joining the EU (Deutsche Welle, 2022). However, the position of Berlin in this question is not widely shared by other EU Member States, which are still waiting for the countries of the region to conform to European standards. Thus, instead of any forward movement, we have a stalemate and any further process of mutual approximation seems to have stalled.

Russia

Russia is one of those traditional players in the Balkans, such as Türkiye or the former Habsburg Empire (now known today as and replaced by the EU) which seems to be a constant factor and one of the main actors on the regional stage. Its role grew again after an interruption during Marshal Josip Broz-Tito's era, who quite successfully manoeuvred during the Cold War era between the East and West as one of the leaders of the so-called non-alignment camp. Unlike former USSR, the Russian Federation is an active player in the Balkans again. Of course, its role is different in post-Yugoslavian states, and especially visible in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia, essentially, the countries kept on the waiting list by the EU.

During the Balkan wars in the 1990s, Russia was more or less actively supporting all those regional actors who were against Western dominance, starting of course with Serbia, which, in Russia's eyes, is like a brother country which lost its territory (and influence). Recently, its very active diplomacy could be detected in Montenegro (with suspicion of open support for a political coup there in 2018), along with its close cooperation with the leader of the Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik (especially since he declared his open support for the independence of the two republics in the Donbas region, and recently announced his intent to secede and to create an autonomous *Republika Srpska*) and the domestic scene in Northern Macedonia. In all respects and dimensions, Russia is exploiting the existing ethnic tensions in the region and indeed everywhere else, in that when it sees a window of opportunity created by the diminished role of the EU (and, to a lesser extent, the US and NATO), it tries to fill the emerging vacuum. That is why one has to agree with the following astute and penetrating observation: "Between backing Dodik in Bosnia and supporting the Kosovar Serbs, Russia successfully

illustrated its ability to exploit sectarian divisions to freeze and intensify conflicts in the Balkans" (Velasquez, 2022).

The Russians are trying to produce countermeasures both against EU enlargement and especially – as is known from Mr. Putin's declarations prior to and during the war in Ukraine – NATO's movement to the region. Thus, Moscow is actively treating the Western Balkans as a regional security issue and is trying to counter or eventually scuttle the request of the regional leaders to NATO to set up peacekeeping operations or even to establish a naval base along the Adriatic coast.

Russia's main goal in the region is more than obvious, and especially visible after the aggression in the Ukraine: to disrupt NATO (and EU) enlargement, and to diminish the West's influence there. Like everywhere, Moscow is using energy sources as a means to an end, along with waged disinformation campaigns and – rather uniquely – the orthodox Church as leverage. Wherever it gets the chance, the Kremlin presents itself as a traditional defender of Serbian interests and common Orthodox and Slavic values. On the other hand, Russian propaganda in Serbia is also increasingly active, promoted by a Serbian-language media financed by Russia. From its content, it is visible that Moscow's efforts are primarily aimed at preventing the countries of the region from coming closer to Western structures (especially NATO and the EU). In this respect, the EU's recent, rather passive attitude didn't go unnoticed by Russia, which continues its plans to further undermine the political and public support for the EU and convert the nations into supporters of Russia. The strong Western support for the fragile peace in the region is still absolutely crucial (Hoxhaj, 2022).

Having such a mosaic of interests throughout the region, the Western Balkans are creating a window of opportunity for the great powers again. It is more than obvious now that the Balkans are again an important area in Russia's geostrategic policy. This situation directly indicates that Russian/Western Balkan relations are intrinsic and require complex analyses (Jagiełło, 2021; Larsen, 2020).

China

It is common knowledge, and widely accepted, that China has recently increased its engagement in the Balkans and has been welcomed by the countries of the region (Türkcan, 2021). China, unlike Russia, is a new player there, but is already a very visible and influential entity, especially in the economic and financial sphere. This situation is mostly due to the two Chinese strategies announced in the second decade of the 21st century, that is the 16+1 cooperation umbrella initiated in 2012, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) adopted in 2013 and later shaped by current leader

Xi Jinping. Like everywhere in the region and the world, the Chinese's tools and methods are different than those used by the Russians. Of course, skilful diplomacy also features in their arsenal, but the most important tools they use are money and investment.

According to the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), China, in a total of 136 major projects, invested 32 billion euros in the region between 2009–2021. In Serbia alone, Chinese investment reached 10.3 billion euros. However, despite inflows of Chinese capital, the EU remains the leading economic partner, with foreign direct investment totalling 70%, and exports at 81% (China in Balkans, 2022).

China has endeavoured to portray itself as a strategic investor, which – much like in previous times in Africa and the whole of the global South – does not intervene in internal political affairs and is willing to turn a blind eye to some aspects such as State aid, corruption or labour laws (Stanicek, Tarpova, 2022). Thus, the well known Western Balkan shortcomings that hamper its relations with the West, such as those connected to the rule of law, media freedom, the protection of minorities, environmental protection, public procurement or even corruption and organised crime are not on the top of the Chinese agenda there, if at all. China is choosing to ignore all of those issues, and is not interested in political regimes or institutions in the partner states, being instead focused on economic success and bigger trade volumes, all under the umbrella of a win-win strategy (that is, accordingly, the economic success of both sides). However, even the "flagship" project under the 16(17)+1 umbrella, i.e., (Chinese) high-speed trains connecting Budapest and Belgrade, are not fulfilled, while Chinese investments in the region were received with mix feelings – and also mixed success. For instance, in Bulgaria, the Chinese company HNA Group was not able to fulfil a 35-year contract to modernise the airport in Plovdiv (at a cost of 160 million euros) and has withdrawn themselves from the project before even getting started (Mihaylov, 2018). In another, even more spectacular and notable case, another Chinese company by the name of CGN stalled the modernisation of the Belene atomic energy plant after a prolonged tug-of-investment-war, several court cases, and ministers being charged in corruption cases (Koseva, 2021). The project's viability was repeatedly questioned, and finally suspended by the local authorities. It was resurrected few years later, but the new tender, in a new place, no longer Belene, was won not by any Chinese companies, but US-based NuScale Power in cooperation with Polish mining giant KGHM (Vujasin, 2022).

A similar situation has also happened in Romania, a country which, for a long time, has been one of the closest allies of China in the Balkans.

Already in 2011, negotiations were initiated between the same CGN company known in Bulgaria, and Romanian nuclear power company Societatea Nationala Nuclearelectrica (SNN) to modernise and expand the existing nuclear power plant in Cernavoda, in place since the 1980s, and in operation since 1996. A letter of intent was signed in November 2013, and the final agreement was sealed two years later. It was followed by the signing of a preliminary investors' agreement for the development, construction, operation, and decommissioning of Units 3 and 4 with CGN in May 2019. Scheduled for commissioning from 2024 onwards, the new units of 720MW gross capacity each were expected to deliver up to 11TWh of carbon-free electricity to the Romanian grid annually (NS Energy, 1996). However, even the prime ministers of both states' direct engagement on the project didn't help to finalise the project, described frequently in the media as the largest Chinese direct investment in the EU.

The lack of transparency, the lack of compatibility with the EU requirements, and also corruption charges have all led to mutual disappointment and, in August 2019, just days after the United States blacklisted CGN over an alleged theft of U.S. nuclear technology for military purposes, Romanian president Klaus Iohannis and US president Donald Trump issued a joint declaration that stated, in part, "The United States and Romania will consider how best to improve the energy investment climate in Romania in ways that benefit both countries. We further urge our industries to work closely together to support Romania's civil nuclear energy goals" (American Nuclear Society, 2021). After this political decision, Romania officially cancelled the agreement with CGN in June 2020, and, in October of the same year, Romania's energy minister, Virgil Popescu, and the then U.S. energy secretary Dan Brouillette, signed an agreement, reportedly worth some $8 billion, calling for cooperation on completing the construction of Units 3 and 4 at Romania's Cernavoda nuclear power plant, as well as the refurbishment of Unit 1. The European Commission green lit the agreement in November of the same year (World Nuclear News, 2021).

Even in Serbia, a country known recently as a close partner of China (together with Hungary and, to a lesser extent, Greece), the major barriers in mutual cooperation including different business mentalities, the lack of contract transparency, suspicions of corruption, pressure from the Chinese to be engaged in the whole process in all respects (not only in the planning process, but also its implementation), including the participation of Chinese engineers or even workers, have all led to many bottlenecks and problems in cooperation with the Chinese high-tech giant Huawei (a large contact to develop a 5G network was signed in February 2017) or steel plants in

Smeredevo and Bor, the latter mainly due to environmental hazards and noise. The Smeredevo Steelworks, known as "the pride of Serbia", was bought by the Chinese company HeSteel Group (HBIS),which purchased the company for 46 million euros (51.9 million U.S. dollars) in 2016. This investment works but is frequently defamed in the Western media as being a polluter and even an environmental catastrophe (XINHUANET, 2021). Also, the Bor copper plant, with a Chinese investment of USD 800 million, has failed to comply with environmental standards. All in all, Serbia has become a hotspot for large-scale Chinese investments but is more and more frequently accused of contributing to the damage caused by highly polluting industries, not observing the rule of law or environmental protection requirements. Sometimes, the Western media claims that even the country's independence is at stake (JustFinance, 2021).

A true case study in this respect is the Bar-Boljare highway which is planned to connect the Serbian capital of Belgrade with the Montenegrin capital of Podgorica, and simultaneously Bar, Montenegro's main seaport, with Bari in Italy. Since signing an agreement in 2014 and constant extensions of the works, new deadlines have been specified. Currently, Montenegro still owes some 809 million euros for the unfinished construction; this amount accounted for 23.4% of the country's GDP in 2014 (3.45 billion euros) (Ralev, 2021). The contract was awarded to China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC) without an open tender, in a rush, and is full of flaws, such as not covering motorway on-ramps. Under the terms of the contract, an arbitration court in China would have jurisdiction in the event of any legal dispute. It also stated that if Montenegro could not repay its debt within the specified timeframe, China Eximbank would have the right to some of its territory. CRBC won commitments that all imported construction materials, equipment, and other goods be exempt from customs and value-added tax. Chinese workers were given 70% of the work, and the majority of the 3,600 workers were brought in from China. Thus, the local economy has benefited very little.

It should not come as a big surprise, then, that some of the countries of the 16(17)+1 cooperation framework, starting from the Baltic countries, have withdrawn from it, while many others, including Czechia and Romania, are hesitant about what to do, pressing for further engagement in cooperation with the western institutions instead. To many of them, including Poland, since 2014's annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas, but especially since the Russian aggression in Ukraine, security factors decisively prevail over economic calculations – calculations the Chinese constantly offer the region.

Conclusions

It is a time of war and competition between the great powers, especially in the Ukrainian territories where, as for now, both the Russians and Ukrainians are, unfortunately, firmly committed to war. Washington and NATO's main aim is rather obvious; to make Russia weaker and eventually press for a peaceful solution when the country's status will be of no great power anymore. Russia, conversely, has just the opposite goals; to make the country as strong as possible, and conquer as many Ukrainian territories as possible. As result, Russia, Ukraine, and the West are stuck in a terrible situation with no obvious way out. We have a prolonged stalemate ahead of us with some possibilities of escalation not excluded.

At the same time, we have some other fronts of this new, great powers competition outside Ukraine; first of all in the South-China Sea and around Taiwan, but also, as one can easily detect, in the Balkans, as described at this study. The post-pandemic international order there is in a state of flux, active conflicts have not ended, nationalism is thriving, while in the power game, traditional powers like Türkiye or Europe are rather restrained or cautious (especially in the EU's case). Russia, at least partially, is an active player trying traditionally to share cultural and religious ties with much of the region, while China is pressing to be there as well. Simultaneously, mostly by NATO enlargement, the US is stepping up there, mainly in the security sphere, while China has strongly increased its position in the region and achieved a new position in the Balkans, mainly in the economic sphere.

At the moment it is difficult to say who will prevail, as the Western powers (mainly the US) are constantly pressing the Balkan countries to focus on legal reforms, democracy, and economic development. Russia is deeply engaged in a lethal war in Ukraine. In the meantime, China's initial goals under the 16(17)+1 and the BRI umbrellas have proved to be not quite as effective as was originally planned, even proving to be counterproductive at times, such as in the case of Montenegro's debt connected to its ambitious highway construction. The situation the in the region is dynamic, but unfortunately the countries in Balkans are divided, split, and without coherence, and frequently give the impression that they don't want to be dependent on external actors for their reforms and domestic transformations. This kind of state of affairs is, however, another invitation for outside powers to be engaged there, as they already are. But who will prevail – whether it be the Western democratic powers, or the Eastern autocratic bloc consisting of China and Russia, is still unknown. It one of the most important, burning questions concerning a

new international order emerging on the horizon, but not crystallised as yet in any part of the globe, the Balkans included.

Looking from a Western perspective, one final conclusion comes to us as more than obvious; the stabilisation of the Balkans region depends on a strong EU policy aimed at enlargement, supported by economic aid and investment in the economy. The current situation, under the shadow of the war in Ukraine is almost akin to a black and white scenario: either the EU and NATO will step up their engagement in the Western Balkans, or China and Russia will gain ground there. As for now, both of these options are entirely possible. As for now, nobody knows whether the Western Balkans, traditionally known the "Europe's underbelly", a "powder keg", a "kettle" or even a "minefield" are in the same position as they historically once were. However, it is sure that they are on the top of the agenda of the Great Powers again. What makes a difference, with history's backing, is the fact that in today's multi-polar world, small countries, including the Balkans, can play a strategic role. Which kind of role is the question currently sitting at the top of the agenda in the region, a region which once again finds itself on the front lines in a major-powers competition, presenting us a situation sometimes described as a "new cold war". In fact, we have many open questions now, but not many answers, unfortunately.

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Between National Identity and National Culture. A View from the Balkans

Abstract
This paper aims to examine the contemporary understanding of identity, culture, and political order of the contemporary Balkans both from within the country and from an external viewpoint. From such a research perspective, an attempt is made to explore the essential relations between national and cultural identity important for nation-building as a formative process of the creation of a political nation(s) in the region. It points out different aspects of these relations. At first glance, national and cultural identity appear to be two opposing categories; categories that are mutually exclusive. As a matter of fact, these are two sides of the same coin in the sense that they are the face and the reverse of one value. The paper also explains various approaches to nationalism as a dominating narrative in the region that still casts its spell on both categories, as well as on political culture essential for nation-building, democratisation and, finally, authentic perspectives for European Union membership.

Keywords: Western Balkans, National Identity, National Culture, Political Culture

Introduction

The centuries-old absence of identity between the borders of nations and the borders of states in the Balkans has led to the situation which Istvan Bibo once signified as "the existential fear of small nations" (Bibo, 2015), along with a schizophrenic political culture that has prevented the formation of stable political order. This has given rise to a special form of permanent political, cultural, and even linguistic fragmentation. In the specific context of formative principles (citizenship, nationality,

and sovereignty), the one that dominates is the type of relationship that directs the formative characteristics of nationalism to the principle of sovereignty, which lawfully creates states of conflict, distrust, war, and instability. Put in this context, the concepts of national identity and national culture have become crucial parts of public life, politics, and education in Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. They are always called upon in case of important political demands, school programs that need to be explained, and the financing of various events and required projects. It is implicitly assumed that every nation has its own different culture and identity that come from a distant past, naturally given and unchangeable, separating the indescribably concerned nation from any other nation. Accordingly, a nation is viewed as a historical constant which has existed in the form of people or ethnicity since ancient times. Ernest Gellner has given a typical view of such approach in his *Nation and Nationalism*: "Our nation has always existed; it is eternal and imperishable. It perpetuates short-lived creatures and generations in the form in which it is temporarily manifested. Nations are the thorns of human existence, and the fact that they exist is neither a case nor morally irrelevant, but is central to the realisation of human happiness. A multitude of cultures is obviously our destiny and people achieve fulfilment only thanks to their unique national culture, not by means of bloodless universality" (Gellner, 2006, pp. 24–25). Questioned by very few, this became a so-called 'national consensus' internally. For the outside world, it can be questioned only at the price of hostility. This paradigm has an incredibly strong, manipulative force that makes people more susceptible to manipulation by national elites and more willing to make sacrifices in the interests of the elites.

A continuously persistent question remains, however, as regards how the nation-states of a multicultural Balkans can meet the challenges posed by the modern notion of the Nation (regarding, for example, the internationalisation of the minority issue), while maintaining a barely-formed ideology of creating a nation-state grounded on nationalism. Is it possible to reconcile these two diametrically opposing discourses without violating national identity and dominant culture, and yet accept minority demands and respect a culture of diversity? Political culture, as an integral part of national culture, can play a significant role in the democratisation approach of national elites in the region. But, in reality, does it play that role? And what kind of (re)constructed, democratic political culture is needed in the region to fulfil that role?

On Nation and Nationalism in the Balkans

Contrary to the perceptions prevalent in modern South Slavic states of ancient nations, they do not actually have a long history; the first European nation, France, arose at the end of the 18th century, and only after that did the process of nation-building begin in Europe. The German nation, for instance, was formed in the mid-19th century whereas, at the same point in time, South Slavic nations did not yet exist. "The facts show that it was not until the middle of the 19th century that three regional, dialectal, and religious groups began to crystallise into three nationalities of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes" (Kohn, 1962, p. 523), and that "(…) contemporary nation-building, Croatian, Serbian and Slovene, was not completed until the Second World War" (Kessler, 1997, p. 95).

With the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the main role of the ruling elites, of course in addition to gaining and consolidating power, was aimed at building a national identity, but accompanied by great violence based on the scariest, most aggressive expression of ethnicity revival. The causes of violence can be attributed to an outbreak of ethnic hostility controlled by the authoritarian rule of the previous system, which disappeared with the collapse of Yugoslavia (Kaplan, 1994). Nationalism lays the foundation for group identity, portraying it as a valuable achievement. It is an ideology which argues that we can restore meaning to a threatened individual if we – to use the idiom – return to our roots and cultural identity. Nationalist ideals tend to connect the concept of the homeland with a myth of origin with a complete cultural domination of the community that is the bearer of this ideal. Nationalists strived to possess the historical territory of their ancestors that once witnessed a flourishing of the spirit of the Nation (Giddens, 1996). The cult of the so-called 'sacred' past, which has the function of preserving the exclusivity and purity of ethnic identity and returning to one's roots, is given first-class normative significance and aims to emphasise the primacy of collectivism over individualism and pluralism. In other words, one ideology of collectivity has been replaced by another; the ideology of socialism has been replaced by the ideology of nationalism.

However, it should be emphasised that Nationalism's divinisation of its own people lies much deeper than in someone's (individual) pathological evil intentions to humiliate other nations. The responsibility in this case is of purely collective provenance – the collectives themselves exalt their past and are considered metaphorically chosen social groups. For that reason, in literally every ethnic group, no matter how small it may be, there is a tendency towards self-division and a sacralisation of one's own origin

or historical mission. It is astonishing, and sometimes even ridiculous, to notice how much each nation, no matter how inferior, determines for itself a special status by expressions of holiness. Every nation is metaphorically chosen/consecrated for itself to be above all other nations by its own virtues or divine providence, or to rule over them. Max Weber once noted, the idea of a "chosen people" is hidden in the background of all ethnic contradictions, and it has gained popularity because it can equally aspire to each of the members of groups that despise each other. Political creators of the Nation adapt nationalist mobilisations of the people along with nation-building to emphasise only those facts that help the construction of the Nation and the creation of the Nation-State (Cipek, 2007). However, this nation-building can also head in an extreme direction as happened, for example, in Croatia in the 1990s when the already-existing nation entered its construction phase, but not from that of the ethnic to civil (or political) but from civil (or political) to ethnic (Cipek, 2007).

The notion that relies on the cult of blood and soil insists on a common language, origin, tradition, and culture, emphasising the so-called 'pure' ethnic notion of nation and nationalism. The Balkan concept of the Nation relies on the originality of the German conception whose type of nationality is particularistic, exclusive, and non-political in its characteristics. In other words, the German idea of the nation is not political, nor is it related to the abstract idea of citizenship, that is, one which supports the process of nationalising the Nation. Unlike that type, the French republican idea of nationality has unifying, universalist, rationalist, and assimilation characteristics, based on the nationalisation of the State. Relying on German tradition, the ideological feature of nationalities in the Balkans is shaped by the forms of ethnocultural unification that is transferred to the unity of the political sphere (Stanković-Pejnović, 2010).

On National Culture and National Identity

Since biological, or so-called 'blood and soil' national continuity does not exist, for the purposes of the nationally-approved writing of history, cultural identity found its place "under which all possible alleged characteristics can be similarly irrationally subsumed" (Fritsche, 199, p. 83). Analogously to national biological unity, the reference to cultural unity has the function according to which, the Nation is no longer a group that more or less voluntarily unites within one political leadership, but it is imagined as a closed, 'natural' entity deserving political sovereignty. Such a view dominates today in the South Slavic states, especially in the former Yugoslav political space. Nevertheless, it has been noticed that

"the unity of national culture and its applicability as a criterion for the notion of Nation is misleading" (Lemberg, 1964, pp. 42–43).

If we try to determine the nature and essential characteristics of cultural identity and national identity, we notice an important contradiction that apparently exists between these two notions; culture implies the creation of universal values, and metanational goals. In that sense, we can experience culture and cultural values as something that opposes the nation and national values. Truth, beauty, and goodness are universal human values, and it is not enough to say international; they are supranational, even meta-national, as they ontologically precede the concept of "the nation", and overcome it. But, at the same time, all basic forms of existence and manifestations of human culture - language, myth, religion, art, are related to a certain nation, derive from national identity, and permeate to the very core of the people. From this perspective however, it leads us to oppose the view that national and cultural identities are mutually exclusive. It is actually to the contrary; it seems that cultural and national identity are ontologically connected and cannot exist without each other. Cultural identity is formed and achieved by nurturing and developing certain (or all) forms of human culture, and culture is manifested and determined by the principles of the nation – language is always the language of a particular people, mythology, religion (to a certain extent, certainly, as it bears hallmarks of a national community from which it originates) etc. Even art, when it reaches universal value, holds characteristics of national identity. National identity, in turn, is achieved and formed through cultural identity. Which nation has achieved a significant degree of national identity throughout history, without manifesting, developing, and confirming its cultural identity?

At the same time, we should remember that traditions and customs that make up a culture do not coincide with national borders. They often display large differences within regions of a nation-state. Last but not least, currently there are tendencies to equalise them around the globe. Other cultural categories also do not necessarily coincide with national borders: science, art, religion, technical achievements, moral values or behaviour. None of it is specifically national. The same applies to people; it is not possible to classify them into nations by behaviour, moral values, science, technical achievements, art or religion. Nations are not created on the basis of some common culture. A common culture did not even exist when France was first formed on the European continent in the late 18th century.

Most of the creations commonly referred to as "Nations" contain various mixtures of the most varied cultural attributes and cannot be

reduced to a few features. Many of the individual cultural features transcend boundaries and cannot – or can only seemingly – be limited to political categories (such as the distinction between Dutch and Flemish, or Croatian and Serbian). Here is a striking example is the problem of determining different national affiliations in the Balkans: if a common language is taken as a feature, it would show that all Serbo-Croatian speakers form one common Serbo-Croatian nation. If, however, religion is taken as the decisive criterion, then the Serbo-Croat-speaking group is divided into three Nations (Serbs, Croats, and Bosnian Muslims). Cultures transcend borders and cannot be politically demarcated.

Common language, as one of many cultural attributes, does not mean belonging to the same nation, which can be seen not only in the Balkans, but also in an example of a number of other polycentric languages spoken by several nations, e.g., German, English, Dutch, French, or Arabic. It should be emphasised that the existence of a common Serbo-Croatian language does not jeopardise the existence of four nations or four independent states (Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro), nor does it jeopardise national identities. Since a culture encompasses many features, it can be the same culture even when people speak mutually incomprehensible, different languages. For example, even radical language differences do not have to be cultural, nor do any other differences that show a comparison of, for example, Vienna and Budapest; although their majority languages (German and Hungarian respectively) are completely incomprehensible to each other, Budapest and Vienna and their inhabitants have much more in common than Vienna and Munich or Vienna and Berlin.

Different religions, (religion being a cultural attribute), do not always represent affiliation to different nations. Considering that, in the Balkans, the difference between Catholicism and Orthodoxy is thought to represent great cultural difference, it should be noted that this is not an objective view: namely, from the point of view of theology and even ecclesiastical organisation, the differences between Catholicism and Orthodoxy are considerably lesser than the differences between Catholicism and Protestantism. Even in Bosnia and Herzegovina, once called "Yugoslavia in miniature" due to a mixture of religions and ethnic groups, cultural differences are not any wider than the differences between Catholics and Protestants in Germany or the Netherlands, and are of the same type. The media and political representatives of the South Slavic nations have accustomed its population to the opposite view, but objectively speaking, Croats, Serbs, Montenegrins, and Bosnian Muslims do not differ culturally.

The question of identity and especially national identity in the Balkans are often associated with nationalism. It can be argued, however, that in addition to what we recognise as "bad" nationalism, there is also "good" nationalism in the form of patriotism. However, the contradiction that has permeated all official ideologies is the distinction between good and bad nationalism – many consider patriotism good, and nationalism bad. But this is the same problem behind the vague expression "national identity". The problem is that nationalism, even when one calls it national identity, always means that an individual who feels powerless wrongly identifies with one collective to which they seemingly belong naturally, namely, by birth. The nationalistic narrative claims that individuals do not exist independently of the nation; that "maternal placenta" to which they owe their life and their identity. They owe their social, cultural, and political existence to national identity, the key word in nationalist rhetoric: national identity is manifested in the language by which they speak, in the customs they nurture, in the destiny history they share, and sometimes in the religion, ethnos, or race to which they belong. Yet cultural, ethnic, and social heterogeneity, which is more or less strongly expressed, proves that the notion of "collective identity" – and all the more so of "national identity" – is completely misleading.

Nevertheless, today's Balkan nation-states arose from the collapse of the Yugoslav federation and are faced with the imposition of a redefining policy of (ethno)nationalism. This policy seeks:

a) to redefine the components of already-existing political bodies;
b) to create new political bodies and an identity policy geared to negotiating and representing diversity within the public sphere of liberal democracy.

The transition from the so-called "age of ideologies" to the "age of cultures", which coincides with the collapse of the socialist order, again emphasises collective cultural identities through national identities. The foundation of such a collectivist pattern is the identification of cultural-ethnic and institutional-political identity in which the political community fully identifies with a national or ethnic community (Stanković-Pejnović, 2010, p. 130).

The Balkans' political space basically follows the process of the nationalisation (*Verstaatlichung*) of nations. Not only does it create a special kind of asymmetry in political development, but at the same time it also establishes nationalism as the strongest and most expansive force in the region. These societies do not recognise the kind of identity between Nation and State known to other western European states. The outcome is that in these societies, Enlightenment universalism and liberalism

never acquired the role it had in the old European nation-states. A specific distinction between nationalism and liberalism in which nationalism is the basic form of shaping collective identity, and where liberal universalism is a form of shaping individual autonomies and constitutionalisation of political authorities, has never been fully recognised in this region. Furthermore, liberalism has rather been imitative and limited in its scope. On the other hand, the process of the nationalisation of nations had nothing to do with that kind of gradualness and spontaneity which characterised Western Europe. This process actually caused the kind of nationalism which was uncontrollable, violent, devastating, as is, after all, every political force in *status nascendi*. The existence of such nationalism before the founding process of the modern state was completed left open the question of the territorial scope of the nation and the question of who belongs to whom (Stanković-Pejnović, 2010, p. 131).

This phenomenon created a schizophrenic political culture that prevented the formation of stable political orders, causing a form of permanent fragmentation. Therefore, formal principles such as citizenship and nationality direct them towards the principle of sovereignty, which consequently legitimise the state of conflict, mistrust, wars and instability.

Can, then, a transformation of political culture help?

On Political Culture(s)

It is obvious that a democratic political culture, as a specific way of life for a democratic political community, represents the broadest political-cultural space within which postulated universal democratic principles are brought to life. If political culture is democratic, it represents a favourable framework and a precondition for a more-or-less-stable functioning of a modern, multi-party system of a competitive democracy. Although the scope of this paper does not allow one to broadly examine the phenomenon, it is essential to mention that the term "political culture" represents the broadest basis for an analysis and explanation of social and political phenomena, as it encompasses and connects many politically-relevant segments of culture: tradition, customs, myths, symbols, patterns of behaviour, attitudes, beliefs, philosophy of history, and prejudice, hence, all that is implicitly and explicitly covered in the culture of a society and which refers to political institutions and political life in the broadest sense of the word.

Democratic values, i.e., democratic political culture and democracy itself are not only in a cause-and-effect relationship, but also in a state of functional interdependence. Like everything else in the human

world, democracy and its cultural assumptions can only be distinguished theoretically, because in reality they form an entity; e.g., the culture of dialogue and political tolerance are as much a consequence as a condition hypothetically conceiving true democracy. Particular *a priori* value elements of democracy are, at the same time, its minimum conditions or reasons (constituents), which logically precede democracy, although in reality they occur simultaneously with it. Jean-Jacques Rousseau noticed this necessity more than 250 years ago in his *Du Contrat Social: ou Principes du droit politique* (On Social Contract: or Principles of Political Right): "For a populace that is just coming into being as a body to be able to relish sound principles of political theory and follow the fundamental rules of statecraft, the effect would have to become the cause! The social spirit that is to be created by these institutions would have to preside over their very foundation; and men would have to be, in advance of the laws, what they should become by means of the laws" (Rousseau, 2017, p. 21). It is worth mentioning, however, that the urban, cosmopolitan and democratic culture, characteristic for secularly-enlightened European nations, remains still far more in principle than in reality. In fact, the leading countries of Europe have never completely (except, of course, declaratively) renounced the ideology of ethnic nationalism, since in most of them the right to citizenship is *in actu* still in the function of ethnicity. Even if critics were to prove it wrong, there is certainly a trend of the so-called 'ghettoisation' of minority nations, i.e., more or less their being discriminatory against their subcultures. In fact, the problem of the relationship between a citizen, on one hand, and a member of a nation on other, is not easily solvable. The mentioned problem represents one of the fundamental contradictions of all modern democratic states which is especially true for multinational and multi-ethnic communities. Therefore, it is at least hypocritical when Westerners disapprove of the tendencies of one nation-state's formation on the ruins of former Yugoslavia, from the position of their, allegedly, completely-civil states. Namely, it is easy to be civic-oriented when the vast majority of your population are members of the same nation, and not a significant number of members of national minorities who would vote in referendums to call into question the territorial integrity and sovereignty of your state. That is exactly what all multi-ethnic states are afraid of. Furthermore, it is the most important cause of the constant presence of nationalism and its political instrumentalisation in the Balkans.

However, the political culture in the region has its own specificities:

- it differs from the Anglo-Saxon type (which gives preference to civil society over the state) as well as the continental-European type of political culture (which presupposes civil society to the state);

- the dominating political culture is passive and submissive, and not active and civic-participatory;
- political values related to national identity are the most stable part of political culture, while trust in the ruling elites is much more unstable and depends on the efficiency of leaders, and government bodies and their officials.

The stability of political cultures in Balkan societies was ensured, above all, by the values of traditionalist culture. Therefore, even after attempts of communist regimes to create a new socialist man, strong nationalist and religious characteristics, aggression, pressure, manipulation, and inevitable authoritarianism are still significantly present in the political cultures of post-socialist countries. Passiveness and clientelism in political culture and its individual correlate – authoritarian personality, are directed towards a uniform way of thinking, along with behaving and making judgements without clear criteria, usually in an irrational way. Unlike a free, rational, and democratically-oriented citizen, the authoritarian personality of the average voter in the Balkans is insecure in their own judgement and leaves the most important political decisions to the leaders. This remains a grand obstacle for any democratic transformation in the Balkans.

The basic values of the so-called "political ethos" of civil society, which constitutes the broadest social base of modern democracy, are tolerance, dialogue, compromise, non-violence, rationality, and humanity. They are opposed by strict collectivism, authoritarianism, tribalism, fatalism, ethnocentrism, militarism, mythomania, political apathy, cynicism, extremism, nostalgia for the so-called "good old" socialist times, as well as an orientation towards regressive re-traditionalisation in general (Babić, 2015). These structural characteristics of the Balkan political culture could not be influenced even by the idea of uniting the Balkan peoples in different variants, which occasionally appeared (i.e., the Balkan Federation after WWII, First Yugoslavia 1918–1943, and Second Yugoslavia 1943–1991). It encouraged the religious and spiritual integration of the Balkan peoples through Orthodoxy, literature, art, etc., but the schism between the Catholic and Orthodox church organisations most often led to the Orthodox Balkan countries being systematically neglected in Western political integrations. The great political and economic border of Europe and the West in general, coincides in the Balkans with the historical division between the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires along the border that separates Slovenia and Croatia from other ex-Yugoslav republics (Huntington, 2011).

Interestingly, much more than nationalism *per se*, a faster approach to the European Union can be burdened by a certain traditionalist exclusivism

of the so-called "historical soil" of the Balkans. This historical soil is treated as an integral part of Europe, not only in a geographical sense, but also in a socio-cultural sense. Affirmative attitudes about the Balkans as a constitutive part of Europe can motivate people to start sharing its values in their work and daily activities, i.e., their way of life. These attitudes are uttered by traditionalists in the Balkans, however, and there is a danger of concluding that in the existing society and its economy or culture, in fact, nothing should be changed in a qualitative sense because, metaphorically, "we are already in Europe". However, Europe is not only a geographical category, but above all a socio-cultural concept, a way of life, and the Balkans will still have to put much effort in so as to eliminate the reasons that keep Europe out of reach.

Conclusions

Despite the aforementioned, no democratic transformation in the Balkans can be fully implemented without the democratisation of political culture and political identity of citizens as the most important political subjects. In general, political behaviour cannot be fully explained solely by the short-term, "rational" interests of political actors, if its political and cultural dimensions are neglected. Political reality proves that a Western European and/or liberal type of democracy cannot simply be transplanted into Balkans societies. What is needed is an appropriate type of democracy built accordingly with the cultural heritage, along with the current spiritual and cultural state of Balkan societies, and that includes the various influences of the international community. In the immediate (re)construction of the Balkan democratic political culture, it will be necessary to work on the democratic political socialisation of the younger generations, as well as on the resocialisation of adult citizens, over a long period of at least several decades. In this process, relying on the patterns of the political culture of the West, but also on democratic elements from their own political tradition, the peoples of the Balkans must create new forms of political culture that grows out of the entire civil society, citizens' associations, NGOs, etc. The structural changes in post-socialist societies in the Balkans, which have already been started, go hand in hand with the previous socialist system. They can lead to a redistribution of social and political power and – through a market economy – peaceful party competition and the rule of law, enabling political tolerance, institutional control of government and the disintegration of the authoritarian type of personality. Democratic, economic, and social reforms promote civic initiative, tolerance, solidarity, and responsibility, creating a safe barrier

from the dangers of a new totalitarianism for civic culture. How the presumed transformation will take place in each of the societies of the region, of course, remains to be seen.

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Towards Closer Balkan Cooperation: The Case of the V4 and the Challenges of the Eurointegration Process

Abstract
By scientifically confronting the model of the Visegrad Group and the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP), this paper draws conclusions about the similarities and differences between them. The V4 model is taken as a reference model in order to detect the main operational elements that a functional form of regional cooperation should have. By means of a comparative analysis of these two models, a conclusion is drawn as to whether it can be a question of functional regional cooperation at all. With the method of content analysis, and in addition to reference literature, the fundamental documents of these two models of regional cooperation are analysed. At its end, it is concluded that the SEECP represents a form of regional cooperation with a clear determination to achieve full membership for all its members in the EU and NATO, but which is still in a rudimentary form that requires serious investment in the solidarity of the members and the need for a strong political will for common progress, the need for deeper involvement of the civil sector and the provision of sustainable and independent financial resources for its functioning in the future.

Keywords: Balkans, Regional Cooperation, Eurointegration Process, Visegrad Group

Introduction

This paper will confront the two models of regional cooperation – the Visegrad Group model *vs.* the South East Europe Cooperation Process (SEECP) as an embodiment of closer Balkan cooperation – aiming to locate

the specific elements of each type of regional cooperation separately, taking into account Eurointegration-process challenges. The research will start from the premise of creating a closer Balkan cooperation following in the footsteps of the Visegrad Group model as a preferred regionalist concept for the EU, and as something beneficial for the region. As a representative model for (comparative) analysis, the establishment and operation of the Visegrad Group of countries is taken into consideration, the Group itself composed of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary, constituted for their own accession into Euro-Atlantic structures. The main research intention aims to detect the obstacles and opportunities for regional cooperation and the full completion of the Balkans in an organisational sense, following the example of the Visegrad Group.

Lastly, this paper seeks to explore the possibility of forming a cooperation of Balkan countries, namely to clarify whether the creation of such a cooperation is just a myth or a real challenge that arises from the European integration process. In that interest, this paper will analyse the motives and opportunities for the formation of a closer Balkan cooperation, based on shared experience, mutual interests, the need for a reconciliation of the region, and its full integration into the EU.

The V4 Model and Its Origin

The Visegrad Group (hereinafter "V4") is founded on the need for the consolidation and stability of Central Europe, its emancipation from Soviet influence, and integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. In brief, that means a "return to Europe by acting together, rather than singly and competitively. Thus, creating stabilisation and security in the region would bring them closer to achieve that goal (…) [And also] to unite the Central European countries on their common road towards NATO and the EU" (Kuzum, 2004, p. 31). Initially, this cooperation was established as a group composed of three countries: Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary, but following the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, this group has grown into the V4. As the so-called "gravity centre", symbolically it was located in the Hungarian town of Visegrad, because: "Originally, Visegrad cooperation was born at a royal summit of the kings of Poland, Bohemia, and Hungary in the Hungarian castle of Visegrad on the Danube in 1335" (Kuzum, 2004, p. 31).

Also, one of the key motives for initiating this cooperation was the hard opposition to the Soviet system. The Czech dissident Milan Kundera explains this through the notion: "the kidnapped Occident" (by the USSR) which, historically, is treated as a "piece of the Latin West

which has fallen under Russian domination" (Kundera, 1984, pp. 1–3), thus implying the V4 states and their spiritual ties with the West. Or, as Prof. Géza Jeszenszky emphasised, "The primary but unspoken aim of the Visegrad cooperation was to dismantle the institutions that embodied our political, military, and economic dependence on the USSR: the Warsaw Pact and Comecon" (Jeszenszky, 2022).

Given such circumstances, and with the major support of the West (the US, the EC/EU, and the Vatican), the aforementioned countries, on 15 February 1991, promulgated the Visegrad Declaration, which launched the V4 idea, oriented towards: "[The] full restitution of state independence, democracy, and freedom, and Euro-Atlantic integration" (Kalmar, 2009, p. 31).

This document declared: "…developing a society of people cooperating with each other in a harmonious way, tolerant to each other, to individual families, local, regional and national communities, free of hatred, nationalism, xenophobia, and local strife" (Kroslak, 2006, p. 2). Based on these values and determinations, the V4 succeeded in establishing an authentic path for mutual cooperation, based on strong commitment to mutual tolerance, support, and solidarity. In that context, it is very useful to stress the example of the V4's solidarity, notably after the fall of Vladimir Meciar's authoritarian rule, when Slovakia evidently stagnated with its NATO accession. Driven by solidarity, the other Visegrad countries fully devoted themselves to the process of democratisation and preparation of Slovakia for NATO accession.[1] Slovakia's efforts "to catch-up to the fellow countries was further stimulated by concrete steps, e.g., the assistance of the Czechs concerning the harmonisation of Slovak legislation in the first years of negotiations with the EU" (Kalmar, 2009, p. 15).

On 14 May 1999, a V4 Prime Ministers' Summit held in Bratislava approved The Contents of the Visegrad cooperation incorporating the Substantive elements of the cooperation and the Structure of the Visegrad intergovernmental cooperation (Visegrad Group, 1999), which undoubtedly enabled the creation of an intergovernmental system for cooperation effected through various forms of meetings, summits and contacts, such as prime ministerial meetings with a coordinating chairmanship on a rotating basis, meetings of other Government members as and when the need arises on particular questions, meetings of State Secretaries of Foreign Affairs twice a year etc.

Furthermore, on 9 June 2000, the V4 established the International Visegrad Fund (hereinafter 'IVF'), as "an international organisation (…)

[1] Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary joined NATO in 1999, while Slovakia joined NATO in 2004.

[directed to] the support of common cultural, scientific, and educational projects; youth exchanges; cross-border projects; and tourism promotion. The budget of the fund (EUR 5 million since 2007) consists of equal contributions from the governments of V4 countries" (Kalmar, 2009, pp. 33–34). The beneficiaries of this fund are: "non-governmental organisations; municipalities; and local governments, schools and universities; but also private companies and individual citizens" (Kalmar, 2009). On 12 May 2004, assembled in Kroměříž, the Prime Ministers of the V4 countries adopted The Kroměříž Declaration, which defined the V4's future cooperation in the following areas: cooperation within the V4 area, cooperation within the EU, cooperation with other partners, and cooperation within NATO and other international organisations. This Declaration also defined the mechanism for advanced cooperation, including Governmental cooperation (meetings of other ministers in the V4 and V4+ formats; the consultation and cooperation of Permanent Representations to the EU and NATO in Brussels, as well as in all relevant fora: OSCE, UN, CoE, WTO etc.), meetings of Presidents of V4 countries, and Cooperation of the Parliaments of V4 countries (Visegrad Group, 2004).

And last but not least is the Bratislava Declaration, adopted on 15 February 2011 at the 20th jubilee of the Visegrad Declaration. The Prime Ministers of the V4 countries acknowledged the extraordinary significance of the V4 in modern history; established to overcome the division of Europe after World War II and facilitate the integration of their countries into the EU and NATO. Also, they confirmed their determination to continue and further develop the mutual cooperation aimed at contributing towards a strong, stable, and democratic Europe and strengthening its position in the global arena in the interest of peace and sustainable development.

Accordingly, the essential elements (attributes) of the V4 model can be concluded (Table 1). This model of cooperation can be treated as "an extensive form of regionalism, because of the increased shift towards the softer areas of cooperation, most notably in the societal security sector with a particular focus on culture and education [etc.]" (Ghica, 2008, pp. 247–248). So far, the V4 have remained mainly a consultative political forum, because "it becomes clear that Visegrad is not an institutionalised form of regional cooperation *per se*, with no standing institution [except the IVF]" (Kalmar, 2009, p. 34), thus, the V4 also represent *ad hoc* political dialogue (Ghica, 2008). Within the V4, there is no dominant actor, and for this reason it is a plural initiative (Ghica, 2008), and while considering the financial sources and resources, this cooperation is partially supported (Ghica, 2008) because of the "common fund to which states contribute for

funding cooperation projects which can be co-financed" (Ghica, 2008). Likewise, considering the solidarity and support of the group (this term refers to the V4 group and the (possible) Balkan group/community), the V4 is a real regional cooperation process, which can be seen from the example of the aforementioned Slovakia assistance. From a civil-society point of view, the V4 is a fully-supported, regional initiative, effected through the various financial and program activities of the IVF whose beneficiaries are the numerous civil society actors. Also, from the aspect of political will, the V4 is promising regional cooperation, directed towards its deepening and thus its contributing to EU improvement, of which the newly adopted Bratislava Declaration is an excellent example.

Table 1: The Visegrad Group Attributes

THE VISEGRAD GROUP ATTRIBUTES		
Dimension of analysis	**Type**	**Observations**
Scope	Extensive	Initially focused on political and economic coordination but currently there is more emphasis on areas from the other sectors of security, most notably from the societal one.
Number of dominant actors within the arrangement	Plural	No member dominated the agenda.
Division of powers between the initiative and the Member States	Consultative	Although it has increasingly promoted policy-oriented cooperation, it has mainly remained a forum for political consultation.
Degree of institutionalisation	*Ad hoc* Political dialogue	Despite discussions on the matter, the initiative has not been institutionalised in any way.
Financial sources & resources	Partially supported	It has a common fund to which states contribute for funding cooperation projects, which can be co-financed.

Solidarity and support of the group member	Real	The strong support of Slovakia in the NATO and EU negotiation processes, regular meetings at different levels and the formation of several *ad hoc* committees.
Civil society	Fully supported	The IVF fully supports civil society; non-governmental organisations, municipalities and local governments, schools and universities, but also private companies and individual citizens.
Political will	*Promising*	The V4 is directed towards its deepening and thus its contributing to EU improvement, for which the newly adopted Bratislava Declaration is an excellent example.

Source: author's own depiction, based on an analysis of Luciana-Alexandra Ghica, 2008.

Towards a Closer Balkan Cooperation

When it comes to the Balkans, and projections for the establishment of some form of Balkan regional cooperation, the situation is more complex than its predecessor, starting not only from the political and security-based fragility of the region, but also from the lack of an advanced form of cooperation. This research will also try to locate and reveal the model of the so-called "helvetisation" of the Balkans. As far as the term "helvetisation" is concerned, this paper defines it as a process of regional networking, cooperation, and integration oriented towards the achievement of common objectives, such as peace, political stability, the advancement of the human rights and freedoms, the advancement of the rule of law, economic prosperity, reconciliation etc. Otherwise, this term derives from Switzerland's experience in overcoming historical conflicts, crisis and wars, through the networking and integration of various national, cultural and linguistic groups, and thus, building a solid and institutionalised cooperation, today embodied in the Swiss Confederation (*Confoederatio Helvetica*).

There are various official and unofficial regional initiatives concerning the Balkans, including CEFTA 2006, the Adriatic Charter, Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), the Southeast European Cooperative Initiative (SECI), Energy Community, the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP), the Berlin Process,[2] the Open Balkan Initiative[3] and many other non-formal and unofficial initiatives, such as a Yugosphere.[4] All these are aimed towards post-conflict consolidation, and the reconciliation and integration of the eponymous region to Euro-Atlantic structures. A most suitable official and structurally organised Balkan regional initiative for analysis is the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP), which is an original form of cooperation among the countries in the region, launched under their own initiative.

Initially, at the Bulgaria-chaired meeting in Sofia in 1996, the SEE countries[5] laid the foundations for regional cooperation for the purposes "of creating an atmosphere of trust, good neighbourly relations, and stability" (SEECP, 2020). Later, at the initiative of the Romanian government,

[2] The Berlin Process connectivity agenda has been latently successful in supporting concrete cross-border and regional infrastructure projects which bring the highest value in the Trans-European Transport and Energy Networks (TEN-T and TEN-E). The Berlin Process is the only high-level political venue that exclusively focuses on the six remaining non-EU Western Balkan (WB) countries. Amidst the multiple crises within the EU that distracted the Union from enlargement over the past few years, coupled with an increasing Member-State-driven approach to enlargement, the Berlin Initiative, promoted since 2014 by the German government, is a much-needed boost in preparing the WB countries for future EU membership by trying to tackle some of the core structural problems in the region. For more see: Zoran Nechev, Florian Bieber, Marko Kmezic, "The Future of the Berlin Process – Discussion Paper", BiEPAG, July 2017.

[3] Greater economic and student exchange opportunities, as well as promoting EU integration in the Member States, are among the goals of the Open Balkan. Saving time at border crossings, citizens of Member States will only need an ID card to travel to other member countries. The countries in this economic zone are getting ready to join to the EU.

[4] The journalist of the eminent magazine "The Economist", Tim Judah, coins the term "Yugosphere", implying the space that tend to become a free economic, trade and customs zone, liberated from the pressure of the past, specifically the pressures of the historical tensions and political intrigues. From Slovenia to Macedonia, "despite all their differences, the people of this region have an awful lot in common, and while the idea of a 'Yugosphere' has never been formally articulated until now, it has clearly emerged in recent years" (Judah, 2009, p. 2). For more see: Judah, Tim, "Yugoslavia is Dead, Long Live the Yugosphere". LSEE – Research on South Eastern Europe European Institute, LSE, 2009.

[5] The SEE countries are: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo (not recognised), Bulgaria, Greece, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Croatia, Serbia, Romania, and Turkey.

this cooperation process was named as the SEECP. Its members are SEE countries along with Slovenia and Moldova. This process is also known as the "Balkan cooperation" or the "Neo-Little Entente" as I have named it, because it can be treated as a political recipient of the Balkan cooperation models of the 1930s, 1950s, and 1980s.

The constitutive document of the SEECP is the Declaration on Good-Neighbourly Relations, Stability, Security, and Cooperation in the Balkans, adopted on 7 July 1996 in Sofia. In this declaration, there were outlined four priorities of cooperation: 1) regional security: enhancing good-neighbourliness and mutual trust, 2) economic growth: developing economic cooperation by encouraging cross-border cooperation, improving transport, telecommunications, and energy infrastructure and the general investment climate, 3) social and cultural development: the promotion of humanitarian cooperation by improving social and cultural communication between countries, and 4) legal affairs and the fight against crime: cooperation in the field of justice, combating organised crime and the illegal trade in weapons and drugs, and fighting terrorism (SEECP). Within this, the Member States of the SEECP declared their aim: "[to] create an [SEE] whose future lies in peace, democracy, economic prosperity and full integration into [EU] and Euro-Atlantic structures" (SEECP, 1996).

Also, the prime ministers of the Member States committed themselves to the "[transformation of] the region into an area of stability, security and cooperation (...) [considering] the prospects for multilateral cooperation in the European perspective and as deriving from the common aspirations of each country of the region to integrate into Europe" (SEECP, 1996).

The next important step was the adoption of the Joint statement by the heads of state and governments of the countries of South Eastern Europe. This statement once again confirmed the previous values and benchmarks of the SEECP, but also stressed their will for pursuing SEE cooperation, "on a mutual and equal basis, in the firm belief that each of us has much to learn from the other" (The Joint Statement). In this manner, they prevent the possibility of imposing one state upon the others, and, additionally, the possible emergence of internal hegemony. Despite Bulgarian, Greek, and Romanian attempts to brand themselves as regional leaders, no state or group of states seems to be leading the initiative (Ghica 2008, p. 243). Directed towards the improvement of the SEECP, the Member States, on 12th February 2000, adopted the Bucharest Charter, which can be treated as the principle platform for the further development of the SEECP. This charter more clearly outlined the goals of cooperation and the following tools for achieving it; 1) an enhancement of political and security

cooperation, 2) fostering economic cooperation, and 3) the enlargement of cooperation in the fields of the human dimension, democracy, justice, and combating illegal activities (The Bucharest Charter). With this charter, the participant states once again expressed their strong belief that, "European and Euro-Atlantic integration is essential in promoting [their] common objectives and cannot be complete without the participation of all of our countries" (The Bucharest Charter). Each one of these goals were also accompanied by specific instruments which gave their implementation a more tangible nature. In the field of political cooperation, regular meetings were planned at two levels in the forms of the executive and legislative branches of power (The Bucharest Charter). In that sense, The Charters' Annex provided procedural aspects and follow-up mechanisms, such as: annual meetings of the Heads of State and Government of the SEECP countries, plenary sessions, sectorial ministerial or high officials meetings (in the field of economy, trade, telecommunications, energy, interior affairs, and culture), the Chairmanship of the Summit, the annual meetings of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs as the main fora for consultations, and the advancement of the objectives of the Process, the establishment of the Committee of Political Directors, and also, in order to ensure the continuity of the activities, the participant states established a Troika at the ministerial level, in addition to political director and other high officials' levels, the establishment of the Chairman-in-Office as an SEECP representative in the meetings of other international organisations and regional initiatives etc.

Considering the decision-making process, this annex stipulates the principle of consensus (unanimity), and the decisions as such only have a consultative/non-obligatory legal nature. But, contrary to that, reality requires institutions along with a political determination for the fostering and strengthening of solidarity. In the SEECP's case, so-called 'institutionalism' and political will lie at a low level, besides the aforementioned 'institutional' provisions, which basically are more a form of rhetorical commitment rather than real political effort. Thus, during the Greek presidency of the SEECP in 2006, several fields were identified as priorities for cooperation among the Member States, most of them in economic as well as home affairs and justice areas, and, for this purpose, the Greek government prepared an action plan for the institutional enhancement of the SEECP (Ghica, 2008, p. 245). But realistically speaking, Greece favoured a more "Greek" affiliation of the SEECP, because of its predetermined role on the Balkans, as the oldest EU Member State compared to other members such as Croatia or Romania. In this context, its hypocrisy can be emphasised, especially in

relation to Macedonia as well as Turkey. An excellent example, contrary to its solidarity-based rhetoric, emerged when Greece vetoed Macedonia's accession to NATO at the Bucharest Summit (2008), justifying its attitude with a "name dispute", as an action which is contrary not only to the commitments of the SEECP, but also to other ratified, international legal documents, especially the Interim Accord signed by Macedonia and Greece in 1995. Likewise, another example of the SEECP's fake solidarity concerns the maritime boundary dispute in Piran Bay, located between Slovenia and Croatia, when the former, as an EU Member State, "blocked the negotiation progress of Croatia, as an EU candidate state" (Slovenes Defiant in Row Blocking Croatia EU Bid 2009). Within this paper, it is important to stress that this dispute was not resolved within the SEECP institutional framework, but with an Arbitration Agreement signed by both sides as well as the President of the European Council.

Hence, it can be concluded that the Balkan region deals with a lot of problems connected to cooperation and solidarity as well. The primary issues are the clashes and strong contradictions between these countries, which even become occasional obstacles for each other.

Despite committing to resolving bilateral disputes, and the agreement not to block each other, the situation, in reality, does not appear to be as positive as it should. The fact that Serbia blocked Kosovo's participation in regional initiatives directly and indirectly by using Bosnia and Herzegovina (Szpala, 2016), along with Greece not participating in the Berlin process despite having an open dispute with North Macedonia, and the fear of other potential candidates hampering the EU integration process for the Western Balkan countries (Nicic et al., 2016), are all indicators that countries use asymmetric powers leading to the disruption of the EU integration process for the Western Balkans.

In this context, it is important to mention and the dispute between North Macedonia and Bulgaria. The problem with Bulgaria came as a surprise, destroying the momentum for North Macedonia to commence EU accession talks, shortly after the painful compromise with Greece on the so-called "name dispute". NATO rewarded that with their granting of full membership to North Macedonia, but the EU failed, seriously deviated from its promises, declarations, and efforts to open the European future for the people of Macedonia, and thus, to stabilise the region. The EU once again proved to be hostage to the national interests of its Member States, at the expense of its "axiological (value) framework, which requires the Union and the Member States to affirm and to respect its values" as stipulated in the Lisbon Treaty in Article 1a (Ilik, Adamczyk, 2017, p. 11). The EU norms and values "are not simply declaratory aims of a system of

governance (...) but represent crucial constitutive features of a polity which creates its identity as being more than a state" (Manners, 2002, p. 29).

Consequently, Bulgaria's veto was not only a blockade of the EU accession process of North Macedonia, but also a blockade of the EU enlargement policy, as "the most powerful instrument for the diffusion of its axiological influence in the region, leaving the region at the mercy of new emerging powers such as Russia and China" (Ilik, 2022, p. 343).

The surprise staged by Bulgaria only intensified the EU-accession fatigue of Macedonia's citizens. In research conducted for the study "The Janus-Face of the EU: European Integration and the Constitutional Identity of North Macedonia", 61.5% of the respondents thought that this situation only contributes to the creation of a (soft) Eurosceptic mood in the Republic of North Macedonia, 32.3% believed that this situation maybe would contribute to such a mood, and only 5.4% respondents denied that (Ilik, 2022, p. 346). Soft Euroscepticism is where "there is not a principled objection to European integration or EU membership but where concerns on one (or a number) of policy areas [the enlargement policy in this case] lead to the expression of qualified opposition to the EU" (Taggart, Szczerbiak, 2002, p. 8). This mood is mostly driven by the reaction of "Macedonian public opinion to the Bulgarian provocations and the feeling of being discriminated against by the EU" (Ilik, 2022). This could be better qualified "as Euro-defeatism, describing the stagnant and uncertain condition of the Republic of North Macedonia concerning the EU accession process previously blocked by Greece and today by Bulgaria" (Ilik, 2022).

In that context, back in 2021, Zoran Zaev, the former President of the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, stated: "The Prespa Agreement, reached by Greece and North Macedonia in 2018 to resolve the name dispute and facilitate EU accession talks, is an example of the country's readiness to engage in diplomacy (…) We expect the EU, all 27 Member States, and the European Commission, to be in line with what it has promised us. That was it; you deliver, we deliver. We delivered more than that. And we expect the European Union to deliver now" (MKD, 2021).

The persistent approach that the EU has taken into solving bilateral disputes shows that, firstly, there is great interest connected to integrating a stable and prosperous region into the EU. Secondly, it shows a determination to gain credibility – among Member States – as regards its commitment in promoting stability in the region.

Hence, the time has come for the EU to "take the Janus mask off its face and replace its hypocritical behaviour with a constructive one" (Ilik,

2022, p. 348), because as MEP Tanja Fajon once acknowledged: "The credibility of the EU is at stake. The crisis caused by the Bulgarian veto is only going to threaten the enlargement process for other countries" (Gotev, 2021).

And finally, in order to reach more effective and more institutionalised cooperation in the region, the SEECP participant states established the Regional Cooperation Council (hereinafter: RCC) and the Regional Secretariat for Parliamentary Cooperation in SEE (hereinafter: RSPC SEE). The RCC arose from the Stability Pact and focuses itself on the promotion and enhancement of regional cooperation in SEE and supports the European and Euro-Atlantic integration of the aspiring countries. Also, its works are directed toward the improvement of the mutual confidence between the states as an essential investment in regional cooperation and the acquisition of the sense for regional ownership. The RCC provides operational capacities to and works under the political guidance of the SEECP, with a focus on the priority areas of economic and social development, energy and infrastructure, justice and home affairs, security cooperation, building human capital, and parliamentary cooperation as an overarching theme. Meanwhile, the SEECP Speakers of Parliament expressed full support for the future activities of the RSPC SEE in the Final Declaration of their 6th Conference in Zagreb (SEECP), emphasising "the European standards of dialogue, tolerance and cooperation (…) and the regional ownership principle (…) fully aware of the important role and responsibility of the National Parliaments in the process of enhancing regional cooperation" (SEECP). Also, the SEECP Heads of State and Government, adopting the Zagreb Declaration, once again stressed the importance of parliamentary cooperation "as an indispensable segment of regional cooperation" (SEECP). More initiatives followed, but without significant input in the deepening of cooperation.

As a curiosity, and in a reductionist sense, it can be said that the SEECP and the RCC also include the "Yugosphere". To understand this properly, one has to read between the lines. Membership of the RCC includes "all the countries of South East Europe, or the seven post-Yugoslav states, (Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Slovenia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro,) plus Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova, Albania, and Turkey" (Judah, 2009, p. 14). However, Turkey has little "really to do with the RCC, and Bulgaria, Romania and Greece are already members of the EU and NATO. Slovenia too is already a member of the EU and NATO but, by virtue of its history and intense commercial links with the rest of the former Yugoslavia, can be nothing else but a part of the Yugosphere" (Judah, 2009, p. 8). Albania is clearly not, but it is a part of the Western

Balkans, "which is defined as the former Yugoslavia minus Slovenia plus Albania.

Consequently, Judah concludes that the emergence of the "Yugosphere" is certainly "a good thing, but let us not be starry-eyed about it" (Judah, 2009, p. 27). However, the usage of this term provoked an avalanche of negative reactions by the political elites of the Balkan countries, and thus, Judah pointed out that the term "Yugosphere" does not imply a new Yugoslavia, but: "….the prefix 'Yugo-'can simultaneously symbolise love and fear, anger and need, [the] past and future. I understand that many cannot swallow the word 'Yugosphere'. But ask why. Not only because of the prefix 'Yugo-', but also because of the deep, emotional problems that opens. You will admit that people do not perceive the Macedonians, Slovenes, and Bosnians quite as strangers as the Austrians or Greeks, but if we move a step further, how to touch a nerve" (Judah, 2010).

Consequently, the idea of this term, says Judah, derives from the reality that it is evident, although many do not want to see it. In the interest of the clarification of this term, he resolutely pointed out: "call it 'Yugosphere', 'region', 'zone', 'Adriatic' (whatever it is), no one cares. Indeed, given the current situation in the world, no one cares about the Balkans as such, if you exclude those who live there. In my opinion, cooperation is in the interest of all" (Judah, 2010). For example, Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia have started to think strategically and have embarked on a joint railway project and it is really high time to stop the politicisation of such strategic regional projects, particularly in B&H, which, because of precisely this, suffers the most. This initiative can be treated as an initial impulse of a post-national networking of the Balkans, at first as an economic (transport or railway) community, and then as an integral part of the European Union. Accordingly, the aim for policymakers "must be to absorb this region, with all its fissiparous tendencies, into the institutions of the EU" (Judah, 2009, p. 34). The former Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) Hido Biščević very accurately describes the phenomenon of the "Yugosphere" and its perspectives as an impulse of the post-national networking of the Balkans. Within that, Biščević stressed five aspects as challenges of the Balkan region and the need for regional cooperation: "Firstly, delays are evident and sometimes worrisome in many sectors - the energy, infrastructure, and railway sectors are examples only. Secondly, any attempt to attract investments solely on a national basis for such large and necessary projects is obviously difficult and time-consuming" (Zvijerac, 2011, p. 3). Thirdly, in the background of the current crisis, "which will not disappear overnight, there is an obvious need for a rapid, innovative, and courageous response to prevent further negative impact, such as

further increase of unemployment rate; and let me briefly outline only this aspect – a prolonged period of rising unemployment compounded by unresolved political issues and widespread social uncertainty may lead to serious threats" (Zvijerac, 2011, p. 3). Fourthly, major changes in international relations "gradually lead to the marginalisation of the region on the scale of global political interests and, therefore, a kind of 'self-help' is a logical necessity" (Zvijerac, 2011, p. 3). And finally, the EU enlargement policy, "which [although it] is rightly perceived as the most important and most powerful tool for stabilisation and progress, is still marked by uncertainties – so it is common sense to raise the issue and it should be raised directly; what will be the engine of economic and social galvanisation while some countries are waiting for accession negotiations?" (Zvijerac, 2011, p. 3).

To conclude, the "Yugosphere" represents a socio-economic phenomenon, based on the linguistic, cultural, national and territorial proximity of the people and states treated in an apolitical sense, and accompanied by aspirations for the full integration of the Balkans into the EU (Ilik, 2019, p. 43).

Conclusions

It can be concluded that regional cooperation processes are processes which have many obstacles and difficulties, more so if they are implemented in the Balkans. As previously mentioned, this paper represents an analysis of the possibilities for achieving a closer Balkan cooperation similar to the V4. So, it can be concluded that the establishment of a closer Balkan cooperation is not a myth, but a real challenge which directly arises from the Eurointegration process, which requires real efforts, strong political will, and a true sense of regional ownership. Considering the current development of the SEECP, it cannot be said that this is a real Balkan cooperation following the V4 model because of the obvious lack of key elements such as real solidarity, the promising political will of the political elites, and a wider connection of the SEECP with civil society actors (Table 2).

In relation to the V4 model, the SEECP can be treated as an extensive form of regionalism, starting from its "large range of areas cooperation from all sectors of security" (Ghica, 2008, p. 246), as well as consultative and *ad hoc* political dialogue, because the SEECP is not an institutionalised form of regional cooperation, and its decisions are not obligatory to any of the Member States. Also, there are no dominant actors, and for this reason the SEECP is plural initiative (Ghica, 2008). Considering the

Table 2: SEECP Attributes

SEECP ATTRIBUTES		
Dimension of analysis	**Type**	**Observations**
Scope	Extensive	Initially focused on political and economic coordination but currently there is more emphasis on areas from the other sectors of security, most notably from the societal one.
The number of dominant actors within the arrangement	Plural	No member dominated the agenda.
The division of powers between the initiative and the Member States	Consultative	Although it has increasingly promoted policy-oriented cooperation, it has mainly remained a forum for political consultation.
The degree of institutionalisation	*Ad hoc* Political dialogue	Despite discussions on the matter, the initiative has not been institutionalised in any way.
Financial sources & resources	Fully supported	All SEECP activities, mainly high level reunions, are financed by the Member States.
Solidarity and support of the group member	Declarative	Solidarity as such is still at a declarative and rhetorical level, for example: Greece vetoed Macedonian NATO accession in 2008 instead of supporting it
Civil society	Not supports	It's a highly top-down type of regional initiative.
Political will	Declarative	There is no political activity to demonstrate the real efforts of the SEECP member states for the future improvement or evolution of the SEECP.

Source: author's own depiction, based on an SEECP analysis.

financial sources and resources, unlike the V4, the SEECP is a fully-supported regional initiative because "all [the SEECP] activities, mainly high level reunions, are financed by the Member States" (Ghica, 2008). Considering the solidarity and support of the group member, unlike the V4 which is not merely an abstract noun, the SEECP is a declarative,

regional cooperation process, because the solidarity as such is still at a declarative and rhetorical level. Besides that, civil society is a very important segment within both cooperation models, because it connects regional cooperation processes with a wider circle of actors. For example, it would be very useful if only a small part of the SEECP resources are invested in the RECOM, a financial support of this nascent citizen regional initiative, aimed at the reconciliation of the former SFRY region. Accordingly, unlike the V4, the SEECP does not wholly support civil society actors, and, from that aspect, it is a highly top-down type of regional initiative. Considering the political will of the SEECP Member States, it can be concluded that this process manifests only declarative political will for the further enhancing of SEE regional cooperation, besides the rhetoric of its Member States.

This research can be concluded with the following thoughts of the famous Nobel laureate Ivo Andric, and his words about the Balkan people's spirit:

"Our people's lives pass, bitter and empty, among malicious, vengeful thoughts and periodic revolts. To anything else, they are insensitive and inaccessible. One sometimes wonders whether the spirit of the majority of the Balkan peoples has not been forever poisoned and that perhaps they will never again be able to do anything other than suffer violence, or inflict it" (Andric, 1993).

Let this thought be a message for the current and future generations, who must recognise the meaning of regional ownership and mutual tolerance and to start investing bigger and more intensive efforts towards the building of a real, supportive, and efficient Balkan cooperation, which will operate within the EU, for the sake of the Balkan people, and for Europe as a whole.

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Challenges in Relations Between Serbia and the European Union

Abstract
This paper analyses the challenges that the Republic of Serbia faces during the entire process of its European integration, with special focus on the problem of how to harmonise the foreign policy of the Republic of Serbia with the foreign and security policy of the European Union, in the context of the introduction of sanctions against the Russian Federation and the problem of meeting the requirements and later closing the Chapter 35 negotiations within which, according to the European Union's Negotiating Framework for conducting accession negotiations with the Republic of Serbia, the issue of normalising relations between Serbia and Kosovo[1] has to be considered. Also, in this paper, the authors point to the rise of Euroscepticism in the Republic of Serbia, but also to the importance of European integration.

Keywords: Republic of Serbia, European Union, Negotiations, Ukraine, Russia

[1] All references to Kosovo in this text, whether the territory, institutions or population, shall be understood in full compliance with the United Nations' Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

The History of Relations Between the Republic of Serbia and the European Union

The history of relations between the Republic of Serbia and the European Union – the EU being the most significant political and economic regional organisation on European soil – began to develop in the middle of the 20th century, when the Declaration on Mutual Relations was signed and concluded between the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the European Communities (Miščević, 2009). From the moment of the establishment of mutual relations between these two so-called 'allies' until today, there have been significant changes in the internal structures of both the Republic of Serbia and the European Union, which have undoubtedly affected their mutual relations. Moreover, it can be said that the aforementioned internal structural changes later defined the relationship of the Republic of Serbia towards the European Union and *vice versa*. Namely, from December 2nd, 1967, when the Declaration on mutual relations with the European Communities was signed, to this day, the Republic of Serbia has gone through a transformation from a socialist republic to a state that, at least in principle, is based on the values of a modern democratic society, having passed through three structures; the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro. On the other hand, the European Union as we know it today has gone through numerous challenges and reforms in order to reach the high level of political and economic importance for the countries of Europe.

Undoubted economic interests, as well as the level of development of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, led to the fact that the SFRY was perceived by the professional public as the first state with a socialist system which could obtain the position of an associated state. However, after the 1990s and the collapse of the Socialist Federal Republic, the sanctions imposed by the international community on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in the 1990s led to something of a regression in the process of European integration (Miščević, 2009). Only after democratic changes and the overthrow of the authoritarian regime under the rule of Slobodan Milošević did any progress in the field of European integration[2] occur. It should be mentioned that all the governments in the Republic of Serbia from the 2000s until today have stated the Republic

[2] This term can refer to the process of reforms within a country, under the supervision and guidelines of the European Union, which results in full membership in the European Union.

of Serbia's membership in the European Union as being a strategic goal.[3] The European Union, as the leader of the European continent, still views the area of the Republic of Serbia along with the entire Western Balkans[4] as an area that is far from attaining full membership in the European Union, which must devote a lot of effort focused on the processes of democratisation and stabilisation in order to be able to seriously consider the desire of the countries of the Western Balkans to join the Union. Joint functioning within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia led to the fact that all independent republics created by the dissolution of the joint state were faced with the same obstacles in the process of stabilisation and implementation of the necessary reforms, primarily in the area of the rule of law, democratisation, and respect for human rights. The essence is, therefore, that the Western Balkan countries are required to fulfil the Copenhagen criteria, established in Copenhagen in 1993 during a meeting of the European Council.[5] At the same time, armed conflicts on the territory of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia put the European Union in a position to demand special regional cooperation from the countries of the Western Balkans.

In this work, the authors will refer to the formal beginning of the accession process of the Republic of Serbia to the European Union through the acquisition of the status of a candidate for membership in the European Union, as well as to some of the more important dates in the said accession process. Also, the authors will try to point out the key problems faced by the Republic of Serbia in the process of joining the European Union, with special reference to Chapter 35 negotiations, which refers to the normalisation of relations between the Republic of Serbia and Kosovo, and to the harmonisation of the foreign policy of the Republic of Serbia with the Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union regarding the introduction of sanctions against the Russian Federation.

[3] The fact that joining the European Union is a strategic goal and state priority has been confirmed by the statements of all the highest representatives of state authorities, who, in their speeches, often speak of the European Union as a national interest.

[4] The Western Balkans is a term used to denote Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, North Macedonia, and Albania (Croatia is often excluded from this group of countries, due to its membership in the EU).

[5] The Copenhagen criteria have a political, economic, and legal character, but to this group of criteria should be added the administrative criteria established at the summit in Madrid, Spain, in 1995.

Serbia's Accession to the European Union

"European integration and membership in the European Union are the national interest and strategic determination of the Republic of Serbia, while the values of the European Union are precisely those values that the Republic of Serbia supports and wishes to further nurture. The Republic of Serbia views the accession process to the European Union as an incentive for reforms and the strengthening of European standards. Additionally, the European Union is the most important trade and investment partner of the Republic of Serbia and a very important factor in the country's economic stability". This quote has been taken directly from the official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, from which we can conclude how important the process of accession to the European Union is for the Republic of Serbia (Ministry, 2022).

Serbia's accession to the European Union has been on the current agenda of future EU enlargement since 2012, when Serbia became a candidate for accession. In the context of one of the most important dates during the process of joining the European Union, it should be mentioned that on 7th November, 2007, the Stabilization and Association Agreement between the European Union and Serbia was ratified, the two sides agreed on the final version of the text which should then be either slightly modified or remain unchanged, which is a move that is preceded by a formal signing. The Republic of Serbia officially applied for membership of the European Union on December 22nd, 2009, and is one of the seven current candidate countries for EU membership, along with Albania, Montenegro, Northern Macedonia, Ukraine, Moldova, and Turkey.[6] In the process of joining the European Union, the Republic of Serbia has not achieved much success.

Although the process was officially launched in 2005, so far only two of the 35 chapters[7] have been closed, and, from 2019 to the end of 2021,

[6] Before that, the European Union unblocked trade agreements with Serbia on December 7th, 2009, and on December 19th of the same year, the Schengen countries approved visa liberalisation for the citizens of Serbia.

[7] Negotiation chapters refer to: 1) the Free Movement of Goods, 2) the Free Movement of Workers, 3) the Right of Establishment and Freedom to provide Services, 4) the Free Movement of Capital, 5) Public Procurement, 6) Company Law, 7) Intellectual Property Law, 8) Competition Policy, 9) Financial Services, 10) Information Society and Media, 11) Agriculture and Rural Development, 12) Food Safety, Veterinary and Phytosanitary Safety, 13) Fisheries, 14) Transport Policy, 15) Energy, 16) Taxation, 17) Economic and Monetary Policy, 18) Statistics, 19) Social Policy and Employment, 20) Enterprise and Industrial Policy, 21) the Trans-European Network, 22) Regional Policy and the Coordination of Structural Elements, 23) Judiciary and Fundamental Rights, 24) Justice, Freedom and Democracy, 25) Science and Research, 26) Education and Culture, 27) Environment, 28) Consumer and Health Protection,

no new chapters have been opened. Therefore, it is clear that we can talk about an obvious stalemate in the accession process. Specifically, in negotiations with the European Union, the Republic of Serbia opened 22 of the 35 chapters covering those areas where Serbia must meet set criteria in order to become an EU member. So far, only Chapters 25 and 26, on science and research, and education and culture respectively, have been temporarily closed, which speaks of the seriousness of the problems faced by the Republic of Serbia regarding the opening of negotiation chapters, the fulfilment of requirements, and the subsequent closing of negotiation chapters with the goal of joining the European Union.

Precisely with the aim of more easily overcoming the problems faced by the countries of the Western Balkans in the process of joining the European Union, but primarily due to overcoming the obvious crisis within the European Union that arises due to numerous factors of a legal, political, and certainly economic character, the European Union is introducing a new enlargement methodology (Ćeranić Perišić, 2020). Certain authors believe that, due to the existing crisis within the European Union, the European Union enlargement policy should be stopped. However, as T. Mišćević reminds us, all candidate countries for membership in the European Union have signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the European Union, as a result of which they are obliged to carry out internal reforms, and that the completeness of those reforms and their implementation undoubtedly requires the help of the European Union (Miščević, 2016). On the other hand, the crisis in the European Union has created a serious dose of mistrust in the Republic of Serbia and other countries of the Western Balkans, first of all as regards the functionality of the European Union organisation itself, but also regarding the final accession and full membership in the European Union (Brennan, 2014).

The new methodology for the enlargement of the European Union based on the example of the Republic of Serbia works in such a way that the previous 35 chapters are grouped into six clusters[8] – the rule of law, the market, the economy, the green agenda, agriculture and foreign relations, and in order for the cluster to be open, the EU needs to recognise the progress made in harmonising Serbian laws with European laws in a certain area. The Republic of Serbia readily welcomed the change in the European Union's enlargement methodology and, in December 2021,

29) Customs Unions, 30) External Relations, 31) Foreign, Security and Defence Policy, 32) Financial Control, 33) Financial and Budgetary Provisions, 34) Institutions, and 35) Other Issues.

[8] These are chapters that have common characteristics, interests, and goals.

after two years of stagnation,[9] Serbia continued accession negotiations with the European Union and Cluster 4 on the environment and energy was opened.[10] Certainly, the opening of Cluster 4 marked a shift in the process of joining the European Union, which led to a series of projections which showed that Serbia could end the negotiations in 2025, but now that deadline is quite uncertain, primarily due to the lack of progress in key negotiation chapters and Clusters. Problems in key sectors that are important for closing all chapters boil down to the rule of law. The problem of corruption, along with an insufficient level of media freedom and transparency in the work of state bodies is especially emphasised.

All the abovementioned problems and their sought-after solutions represent a serious challenge for the Republic of Serbia. Indeed, the problem of respect for human rights and the level of democratisation of society is not a small problem. However, there are two much bigger problems on the European path of the Republic of Serbia, namely the harmonisation of the foreign policy of the Republic of Serbia with Foreign and Security the policy of the European Union and the question of the normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina, that is, the Republic of Serbia and the temporary Pristina institutions.

Negotiation Chapter 35 – The Normalisation of the Relationship Between the Republic of Serbia and Kosovo

With the opening of Chapter 35 negotiations, the issue of the normalisation of relations between the Republic of Serbia and Kosovo was presented as a condition that the Republic of Serbia must fulfil if it wants to become part of the European Union. The complex process of negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina has, so far, taken quite a long time.

The first signal for the start of negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina was given by the General Assembly of the United Nations in September 2010 through the adopting of a joint resolution of the Republic of Serbia and the European Union. The first meeting of representatives of Serbia and the Kosovo was held in March 2011 and, at that meeting, the Serbian delegation was led by the then political director of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Borko Stefanović,

[9] During this period, not a single negotiation chapter was opened, nor were there any significant developments regarding the process of joining the Republic of Serbia to the European Union.

[10] Within this cluster there are Chapters: 14) Transport Policy, 15) Energy, 21) the Trans-European Network, and 27) the Environment.

while Kosovo was led by Deputy Prime Minister Edita Tahiri. The mere beginning of the dialogue was a move away from the deadlock, taking into account that the representatives of Kosovo, after the unilateral declaration of independence, refused to start any negotiations with representatives of Serbia. At the start of the dialogue, the topics concerned the relative cadastres, air traffic, customs stamps, the CEFTA[11] presidency, and telecommunications. It is clear that Belgrade and Pristina have fundamental differences when it comes to the status of Kosovo, however, the task of the dialogue between the two parties in this case is to resolve the political crisis caused by the conflicts in the area of the southern Serbian province, primarily by facilitating and improving life for citizens who are located in the territory of Kosovo, while the status question comes only at the end.

In order to fulfil that initial goal of the dialogue, in April 2013 the first agreement on the principles of the normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina was signed in Brussels, and became known as the Brussels Agreement. The agreement was signed on behalf of Serbia by Prime Minister Ivica Dacic, and on behalf of Kosovo by Prime Minister Hashim Thaci, who is currently in front of the Special Court in The Hague, wherein he is charged with war crimes and crimes against humanity. The Brussels agreement caused great dissatisfaction in Serbia, which resulted in protests in the country's streets. Numerous academics and professors have also come to the conclusion that the Brussels Agreement is harmful to Serbia's national interests, and the Serbian Orthodox Church is not immune to such a political move, either. Academician and doctor of legal sciences Kosta Čavoški warned the state leadership before the meeting in Brussels not to agree to be blackmailed by Brussels, and academician Matija Bećkovič said: "Kosovo has no price and can only be given for free, which is an example almost unheard of in history. That is such rare chivalry in today's world and we will go down in history for that gallantry". On the other hand, the Constitutional Court of Serbia rejected the proposal to evaluate the constitutionality and legality of the Brussels Agreement, and it did so on the recommendation of the then Minister of Justice Nikola Selaković, who stated that it was a political, not a legal, act. It should also be noted that the entire text of the agreement does not mention the Republic of Serbia anywhere.

What is the result of the Brussels agreement? The security structures and judicial institutions of Serbia in the area of the southern Serbian

[11] Central European Free Trade Agreement, CEFTA; CEFTA is an agreement that today defines a single free trade zone in Southeast Europe.

province have been abolished, and the Union of Serbian Municipalities has not yet been established. This behaviour of the representatives of the temporary institutions in Pristina significantly complicates the dialogue, and the officials of the European Union constantly have to remind Pristina to respect the agreement from Brussels, and among the last to speak about it was the spokesperson of the European Union for foreign policy and security, Peter Stano.

There were delays in the negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina. Negotiations have now recommenced, but only at the level of technical dialogue. The key issue is the demand for a mutual recognition of Serbia and Kosovo. This request is not formally mentioned anywhere in official EU acts, but the German Chancellor, during his recent visit to Belgrade, explicitly mentioned for the first time that the final goal of the negotiations is mutual recognition. The Republic of Serbia will fulfil this condition, despite the fact that it entails an official renunciation of a part of its territory, which would be in conflict with the Constitution. The most recent proposal that the President of the Republic of Serbia spoke about is a proposal from France and Germany, which would imply that the Republic of Serbia would allow the entry of Kosovo into all international organisations, including the United Nations (Radio Free Europe, 2022). At a press conference, the President of the Republic of Serbia said, „The bottom line is that Serbia will allow Kosovo to join all international institutions and organisations, including the UN. For that, Serbia would get quick entry into the EU and probably significant economic benefits", but an official paper with France and Germany's said proposal has not yet been made available to the public.

However, from the point of view of the Republic of Serbia and its national interests, the fact that five Member States of the European Union[12] do not recognise the unilaterally-declared independence of Kosovo is also important, and the position of the Republic of Serbia in that context is more favourable, because precisely those same Member States oppose the policy of expanding the European Union in the case of Kosovo (Grubejsic, 2018).

Considering all of the above, but also the fact that in the Brussels negotiations, the Republic of Serbia encounters serious resistance and the slowing down of dialogue and negotiations by the temporary institutions in Pristina, even despite the fact that the Serbian side in the dialogue makes constant concessions aimed at the full implementation

[12] The independence of Kosovo is not recognised by Romania, Slovakia, Cyprus, Spain, or Greece.

of the Brussels Agreement.[13] Certainly, the problem of the normalisation of relations between the Republic of Serbia and Kosovo is one of the biggest problems and challenges that the Republic of Serbia faces on its European path, but if the tendencies and intentions of the Government of the Republic of Serbia are sincere in terms of European integration, the Government of the Republic of Serbia, in the shortest possible period, must find a way to overcome all obstacles in the process of normalising relations and achieving a final, lasting peace with Kosovo Albanians.

The Harmonisation of the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Serbia with the Foreign and Security Policy of the EU in the Context of Sanctions on the Russian Federation

One of the conditions that every country which wants to become a full member of the European Union must fulfil is the harmonisation of its foreign policy with the common Foreign and Security policy of the European Union. In the field of harmonising the foreign policy of the Republic of Serbia with the Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union, surely the biggest challenge is the relationship with the Russian Federation. Relations between the Republic of Serbia and the Russian Federation are traditionally good, primarily due to the spiritual connection between the Serbian and Russian people, which is why the citizens of the Republic of Serbia are often perceived as so-called 'Little Russians' in the eyes of the Western Europe.

The open, armed conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine, which began in February of this year, led officials of the European Union, as well as the Member States of the European Union, to once again question the sincerity of the Republic of Serbia's desire to become a member of the European Union. Namely, the issue of introducing sanctions to the European Union has been relevant – to a certain extent – since 2014 and the crisis in Ukraine. The essential argument of the Republic of Serbia for not imposing sanctions on the Russian Federation is the position of the Russian Federation in the United Nations Security Council, in which the Russian Federation has the status of a permanent member, and consequently the power of veto, which is of great importance for the Republic of Serbia in the context of the impossibility of Kosovo in the

[13] The representatives of the temporary institutions in Pristina were rarely handed over by the Serbian state leadership. Kosovo got a calling number, a health system, a judiciary, police, an energy system and administrative control of crossings. The last of the concessions of the Republic of Serbia related to the agreement and recognition of number plates on cars.

process associated with joining Kosovo to international organisations. However, it should be mentioned that although the Republic of Serbia has not yet imposed sanctions on the Russian Federation, the Republic of Serbia does not recognise the newly-formed republics on the territory of Ukraine, namely the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and the Lugansk People's Republic (LNR), which clearly shows that the Republic of Serbia respects the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

The citizens of the Republic of Serbia do not support the introduction of sanctions against the Russian Federation. According to data from a Demostat[14] survey from June 2022, almost 80% of respondents disagree with the view that the Republic of Serbia should impose sanctions on the Russian Federation. In the same survey, 81% of respondents point out that the Republic of Serbia must preserve its military neutrality, and it can be concluded that the citizens of the Republic of Serbia believe that the country would maintain its military neutrality by not imposing sanctions on the Russian Federation, because it would not align itself with any side in the existing conflict between the West and the Russian Federation.

On the other hand, it seems that the officials of the European Union will not have much understanding for the non-alignment of the foreign policy of the Republic of Serbia with the Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union. Thus, Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner for the Enlargement of the European Union, said, on October 19th at a sitting of the European Parliament, that, "in the current geostrategic and political context, it is clear that Serbia needs to increase its efforts in order to harmonise with the foreign policy positions of the European Union, including sanctions against Russia. Since the beginning of the conflict, this harmonisation is now more important than ever before", but he also pointed out that the European Union sees the Republic of Serbia as a sincere partner with whom it shares European values (NSPT, 2022).

Growing Euroscepticism in the Republic of Serbia

The listed challenges that are on the European path of the Republic of Serbia mainly cover the process of the normalisation of relations with Kosovo within the Chapter 35 negotiations, and the harmonisation of the foreign policy of the Republic of Serbia with the Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union in the context of the introduction of sanctions against the Russian Federation. On this subject, the citizens of the Republic of Serbia do not have an affirmative opinion; they rather have a somewhat clear, negative attitude, leading to the fact that today

[14] Research and publishing centre.

we can talk about an unprecedented growth of Euroscepticism in the Republic of Serbia. From year to year, as various polls show, the support of the people of Serbia for joining the EU has been declining. According to one of the most recent polls from November 2021, just over half of the participants in conducted research by the Advisory Group for Public Policy Balkans in Europe (BiEPAG) voted for Serbia's membership in the European Union. In response to the question: "Are you in favour of your country's entry into the European Union?", 53% of Serbian citizens answered in the affirmative, with 43% saying no.[15]

The Republic of Serbia's citizens' distrust as regards the European Union and its future and functionality as well as in its „good intentions" towards the Republic of Serbia, leads to the situation that the citizens of the other countries in the region believe that full membership is the best option for their country, and only respondents in Republic of Serbia have given priority to economic integration without membership in the EU.

Conclusions

The Republic of Serbia has come a long and difficult way since the beginning of the accession process. This process has been ongoing for more than a dozen years and the progress made is not satisfactory. On the other hand, Serbia uses significant EU pre-accession funds, and foreign trade with the European Union as a result is on the rise. The European Union is Serbia's most important foreign trading partner. There are numerous obstacles on Serbia's further path to the European Union, both in the form of harmonisation with European Union standards and political conditions, such as the normalisation of relations with Kosovo. The issue of harmonisation with the European Union's Foreign and Security policy towards the war in Ukraine also remains. Due to small shifts in the public's mindset, Euroscepticism is on the rise in Republic of Serbia; the majority of citizens believe that the European perspective has been betrayed, especially in light of France's position on the further enlargement of the union to the countries of the Western Balkans. Therefore, new incentives should be encouraged, which would be encouragement for all the countries of the Western Balkans not to give up walking the European path and remain, at the very least, an eternal candidate for joining the EU.

[15] On the other hand, residents of Albania (94%) and Kosovo (90%) expressed the greatest support for membership, with 83% of respondents in Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina expressing support, and the same support expressed by 79% in Northern Macedonia.

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Reform in the Public Administration System in North Macedonia

Abstract
Reform processes are an immanent part of social development in each state and society. In North Macedonia's case, many of the reforms are closely connected with the standards and criteria established by the European Union, and are demanded for the process of accession towards the European Union.
One of the crucial challenges for the EU accession process is not only the reform of the Macedonian public administration, but also the judicial system. In this paper, the genesis and the situation of the reforms in the public administration will be examined, with special emphasis on the process of accession of North Macedonia towards the European Union.
In this paper, using the descriptive, comparative, method of content analysis, along with other relevant methods, we will try to determine the best "reform path" of the Macedonian public administration, bearing in mind past experiences, the current situation, along with future development anticipations, predictions, and suggestions.

Keywords: Public Administration, Reform, Process, Integration

Introduction

Public administration, *de facto* and *de jure*, is one of the main caryatides in every developed and democratic state. The construction of a public administration in the Republic of North Macedonia that will be able to bear

the burden of integration into the European Union, and then the obligations arising from membership, as well as its successful integration into the European Administrative Space (EAS), is a top priority that horizontally binds all sector reforms in the European integration process.

Accession towards the European Union, in addition to the general processes of reform adjustment, also imposes specific requirements specific to the areas in which the Union itself functions. Although EU legislation (*acquis communautaire*) can have a significant impact in an institutional sense within special departments, there is no single and standardised piece of EU legislation that would refer to administrative structures globally. EU membership *de facto* sets empirical standards for public administration and undoubtedly enforces sanctions if they are not respected, but the European Union leaves discretionary rights regarding the modalities of implementation of these standards, launched and practiced by the states themselves. Hence, belonging to the single European administrative area (EAP) does not imply compliance with mandatory norms for the structure and organisation of an administration, but rather to an adherence to standards and principles of public administration operations that ensure the effective implementation of the *acquis communautaire*.

During the last three decades, since the Macedonian state's gaining of independence in 1991, there have been efforts towards a reform of the public administration system. By the beginning of the reform period, many obstacles had risen, such as the so-called 'communist administrative heritage from the former Yugoslav Federation', corruption in public institutions, a transition period 'enriched' with financial crises, embargoes, inflation, and many other institutional and non-institutional factors that had an influence on the slow reform process of the state's public administration.

Strategy for the Reform of the Public Administration

The reform of a public administration is a continuous process that takes place in those countries with a developed democracy and market economy, but in the last few decades it has gained more and more intense momentum in countries in a state of transition.

The first strategy for the reform of the public administration in the Republic of Macedonia was adopted in May 1999. Although almost a decade has passed since its adoption, in general, it does not represent a time-shifted document, but a general framework on which some new elements are built, such as the fair and proportional representation of non-majority communities in the public administration, the new fundamental

European principles for the functioning of the public administration in the Republic of Macedonia, etc.

The basic goals of the reform of the public administration within the framework of the integration towards the European Union are:

- the education and training of the public administration in the Republic of Macedonia for the continuous process of the transposition and implementation of European legislation;
- empowering the public administration to create and implement overall reforms of the economic, political, and legal system;
- and building institutions necessary to ensure the free flow of goods, capital, services, and people in the European Union (Government of the Republic of Macedonia, 2004, p. 217).

The Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA), in its preamble, paragraph 4 specifically, determines the reform of the public administration as one of the goals of the SAA, and in Article 74 it is established "the obligation of the parties to pay special attention to the strengthening of institutions at all levels in the areas of administration in general and the application of the law and the mechanisms of justice in particular" (*Stabilization and Association Agreement*, 2004). The implementation of the Stabilization and Association Agreement imposes an appropriate adaptation of public administration for the implementation of its provisions. This results from the fact that the SAA means a gradual convergence, practically with all policies of the Union, which also implies appropriate institutional adaptation.

The essential goal of the reform of the public administration in the Republic of Macedonia is to improve its structures and processes, which would better support the development of a democratic society and a successful market economy. The reform of the public administration should ensure the development of the Macedonian system of public administration with the following key characteristics:

- a small public administration, that is, a small "state" with a changed nature of state intervention aimed primarily at regulatory functions and monitoring functions;
- a simple structure of the public administration system in accordance with the principle of parliamentary democracy – as few separate structures as possible that are not covered by and are not under the management of an authority whose official has direct parliamentary responsibility;
- a democratic administration which, within the framework of the Constitution, is guided by law in the exercise of public powers and the use of the funds entrusted to it;

- the protection of the administration during the exercise of powers from political and other interests and its control through transparent mechanisms and by independent institutions;
- a responsive, citizen-oriented public administration, as an efficient service for citizens and legal entities in exercising their rights;
- a decentralised model of public administration (Government of the Republic of Macedonia, 1999, p. 8).

Hence, the basic principles for the functioning of the new public administration system are: the rule of law, transparency, competence, stability, responsibility, predictability, equal treatment, efficiency, and ethics.

From the perspective of the approach to public administration reform, it is rather important to emphasise that it should be considered as a complementary part of the European integration activities. For future membership in the European Union, it is, first of all, necessary to fulfil the so-called Copenhagen and Madrid criteria, as well as the fulfilment of certain standards in the public administration itself – for example, standards in accounting, auditing or public procurement, etc.

For the realisation of the long-term goal of creating an efficient public administration and changing the nature of state intervention, it is necessary to take into account the need to reconsider the possibility of transferring certain functions from the public to the private sector or the possibility of introducing market elements in the work of the public sector, that is, to implement a process of the so-called divestment (the separation of essential functions of the state from non-essential ones). Also, the option of simplifying legislation should be considered for a more efficient implementation of the state's regulatory function and the de-concentration of the state's competences. Of particular importance for changing the role of the state by emphasising its regulatory and supervisory function and increasing the efficiency of its work in favour of the faster and better realisation of the rights of citizens and economic entities is the initiation and continuous practice of extensive activities to simplify legislation, the introduction of a one-stop shop system, one-stop shop methods; the completion of all administrative procedures in one place, which would reduce the burden on the state and increase the transparency of the legal system, and also increase the freedom of action of citizens and entrepreneurs.

Numerical reduction i.e., the "guillotine" of public administration, is related and should be considered from the aspect of fiscal effects and the restructuring of public finances in a wider context, especially due to the need to complement and deepen structural economic reforms and to direct

the management of public expenditures in the direction of establishing a balance between public consumption and public investment to support the further growth of the country's private sector. The Republic of Macedonia could, in the long term, accept a reduction in the size of its public administration, but it is necessary to pay particular attention to the fact that its multi-ethnic character imposes the employment of members of non-minority communities in the public administration.

The legal framework for the realisation of the constitutional provisions for the fair representation of the members of the communities that are not the majority in the Republic of Macedonia is established in the largest percentage within the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA). The implementation of this constitutional principle requires finding specific solutions that will not violate the constitutional principle of equal access to jobs along with the principle of competence. As one of the methods for raising the percentage of representation of communities in the public administration, specially designed training sessions for members of ethnic communities are being established.

One of the goals of public administration is the creation of a system of public administration that works based on the principles of equal treatment in the exercise and protection of citizens' rights. The overall practice of the behaviour of the administration in relation to the citizens in exercising their rights should undergo radical changes, in the sense that the awareness will prevail that it should be in the function of the citizens, economic entities, and other legal entities as their efficient service. From the point of view of the realisation of the rights of citizens and other subjects, it is of particular importance with the reform of the public administration to enable their participation in the decision-making processes by the authorities, while the strengthening of their institutional action should also be encouraged through, *inter alia*, citizens' associations, non-governmental organisations, and the creation of public-private partnerships in various areas. The most significant segment in the participation of citizens in the decision-making processes is their participation in the drafting of laws and by-laws, which, as a model of communication, interaction, and consultation in the drafting of legislation, should be encouraged in the Republic of North Macedonia using the experiences coming from countries with highly developed democracies.

The increase in the competences of local self-government in the sphere of local economic development, rural and urban planning, local financing, environmental protection, public services, education, and health care in accordance with the Law on Local Self-Government of 2002 implies a reform of the role of the state in the management of sectors that are

being decentralised. Taking into account that the capacities of local self-government were also limited in the competences that, until a few years ago, were fully or partially at the level of local self-government (such as urban planning, communal activities, culture, sports, social and child protection, preschool upbringing and education, basic health care and other areas), fundamental reforms in the management of local affairs are necessary.

This means that the personnel and technical staffing of local administration is needed in order to respond successfully to the increased obligations of the process of decentralising the Republic of Macedonia, but also so as to be able to consistently apply the obligations derived from the European Charter for Local Self-Government (Council of Europe, 2013).

In order to ensure a unified approach to the use of information technology in public administration, and, in general, in the function of political decision-making processes, it is necessary to establish uniform information standards that should be applied by all employed officials and other personnel in public administration in the Republic of North Macedonia. It is very important to note that the application of information technology in public administration takes place in two directions:

- the introduction of information technology within the framework of the modernisation of work processes in public administration;
- the use of information technology in the function of the transparency and realisation of citizens' rights.

The main goals of the Strategy for public administration reforms in Macedonia, launched in 2010, is the upgrading and adjustment of the legal and administrative framework, the application of concepts and EU standards, and an improvement of the general administrative capacity as well as the administrative capacity in the various sectors. That way, the goals of so-called "good governance" will be achieved, and public administration will grow from a regulatory-oriented administration into a service-oriented administration which will be fully incorporated into the so-called 'European administrative area'.

Based on its vision, the main objective, and the above principles, the Strategy for RDA contains a series of special objectives. The most important special objectives are as follows:

- improving the quality of administrative services for citizens and businesses, an emphasis on the improvement and rationalisation of administrative procedures through the simplification of the same, and interconnection with modern solutions in the area of information technology (including all aspects of the concepts of so-called 'e-government' and 'e-management');

- improving the quality of the public services by strengthening the function for human resource management (HRM) and development throughout the administration;
- improving the functions of the General Secretariat at the Government/central authority for strategic planning and policy coordination;
- increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of the public finance system through improving the budget process, internal and external financial controls, the further development of program-oriented budgeting, and a more transparent system on public procurement;
- improving the openness and transparency of the public administration through improved access to public information (Government of the Republic of Macedonia, 2010, pp. 7–8).

The following principles will be the basis of continuous efforts to achieve the goals and the measures in the priority areas of the 2018–2022 Strategy for Regional Development and for the transformation of public administration:

- A commitment to realising its vision – which implies a commitment of the political level and the administration to achieving long-term goals through the implementation of realistically feasible reform steps and effective policies which will contribute to sustainable development;
- Legality – the rule of law is a fundamental condition for economic development and social stability. The operation of the public administration will be in accordance with the laws and with full respect for basic human rights and freedoms. The legislature process will ensure the adoption of quality policies and laws that will contribute to strengthening legal security for citizens and the business community;
- Involvement – which implies the active participation and involvement of the civil sector, the business sector, and other stakeholders in the policy making process;
- Digitisation – the provision of good-quality, fast, and easily accessible services will rely on modern technologies and their innovative use through constant technical upgrading and the building of appropriate capacities;
- Consistency in implementation – which implies a consistent and effective application of regulations, as well as the efficient placement of the institutions for coordinated purposes, and the management and quality provision of services to citizens and the business community.

Reform in public administration in the context of this strategy means reform in the following priority areas:

1. Policy making and coordination;
2. Public service and human resources management;

3. Responsibility, accountability and transparency;
4. Public services and ICT support of the administration (Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2018, pp. 10–12).

The Ministry of Information Society and Administration, in cooperation with SIGMA, organised a workshop for the preparation of the Public Administration Reform Strategy in Skopje, on May 11th 2022 (2023–2030).

During the design of the new Strategy for RJA (2023–2030), as Minister Aliti said, recommendations for areas that require additional reforms in order to comply with EU standards must be taken into account. Minister Aliti emphasised the strong commitment and dedication to the RDA process and thus the implementation of the measures and activities foreseen in the four priority areas of the RDA Strategy. He also emphasised that the process never stopped in the direction of a modern and efficient public administration based on digitisation, which provides fast, quality services for citizens and business entities (Ministerstvo za informaticko opstestvo i administracija, 2022).

The working group includes representatives from ministries and state institutions, as well as representatives from the civil sector and from international organisations based in Skopje, under the coordination of MIOA.

A summary of the benefits of the reform of the public administration in the Republic of Macedonia for the citizens, but also for the state itself, would be; the election of state and public officials according to the so-called merit system i.e., a system of merits and professional competences, not according to a spoils system, or, in other words, a system of political affiliation, sinecures, nepotism, cronyism, etc., the establishment of a network of communication and policy coordination of all public administration institutions, with a direct consequence – an integrated and consistent decision-making system within the administration itself, and an increased ability of the public administration regarding the acceptance and implementation of numerous tasks arising from the European *acquis communautaire*, etc.

The Process of Training Civil Servants in Charge of the European Integration Processes of the Republic of North Macedonia

A key area of public administration reform is the reform of its central core, namely, the state administration. One of the priorities of public administration reform is the construction of a training system for civil servants, based on the specific needs of the state authorities, as well as

on the basis of the needs arising from the Stabilization and Association Agreement.

The training and education of civil servants according to methods that are characteristic of the European Union is a *conditio sine qua non* for the consistent implementation of the SAA, but also for the successful conduct of negotiations for membership in the EU.

For a successful approach to the European Union, it is necessary to take into account the following factors during the training of civil servants in the state administration: to pay attention to the necessary quality, knowledge, and skills of civil servants, especially in the EU issue; the training should be coordinated with the reform of the public administration, that is, it should comply with all the necessary changes in the structure of the administration according to the EU; to pay attention to the preparation of officials in the state administration in pre-accession and accession to the EU especially, considering the objective lack of qualified staff; to pay special attention to the knowledge of world languages, especially English and French, as well as other working languages of the EU, and to use the experience of other countries in the training process (Government of the Republic of Macedonia, 2000).

In the conditions of an increasingly intense process of globalisation and an increasingly open European economic market, one of the most significant prerequisites for harmonising legislation and achieving a successful approach in negotiations is precisely the training and preparations of civil servants for the process of European integration. The main objectives of EU training can be divided into three types:

- The **short-term goal of EU training** is to ensure that civil servants, who are directly involved in this integration process, possess the complete knowledge necessary in all activities in the approach to the EU;
- the **medium-term objective of the EU**, and the training of civil servants in the Republic of North Macedonia, refer to the improvement of skills and knowledge of civil servants involved in the process of preparation, negotiations and accession, and those who are directly involved in the implementation of the *acquis communautaire*;
- the **long-term goal of EU training** is to support and develop the state administration in order for the Republic of North Macedonia to participate fully in the work of the European Union. This goal gives an opportunity for the country to assume the responsibilities and obligations regulated by the EU and guarantee the successful implementation of the legislation and the common policy, as well as the ability to cooperate with other Member States (Government of the Republic of Macedonia, 2000, pp. 8–9).

During the pre-accession period, as well as after its accession to the European Union, it is necessary for the Republic of North Macedonia to have well-prepared and qualified civil servants who will be engaged to work in the state institutions in the Republic of North Macedonia, the diplomatic missions in Brussels, and in the Member States of the EU. Based on the priorities in the negotiations with the EU, the target groups that are the subject of this training have been determined: directly – civil servants involved in the preparation of legislation, especially on issues related to the harmonisation of Macedonian legislation with the EU's; civil servants who coordinate European integration processes at the national level; civil servants and experts participating in accession negotiations and in various EU working groups; higher civil servants who do not belong to the negotiating body, civil servants who work in local authorities; public-relations and information officers; judges; translators and interpreters; trainers involved in EU training; other civil servants involved in European integration; intermediate politicians (members of the Assembly, ministers, and political parties); all state and public officials at the state and local level; educational institutions (primary and secondary educational institutions, universities, training and research institutions); various interest groups (business groups, economic organisations and unions, civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations, etc.); the media for public information, the general public; members of the permanent representation in Brussels; civil servants involved in the coordination of the European integration process; civil servants working in the structures responsible for the implementation of the *acquis communautaire*, and civil servants working in the European Commission and other EU institutions.

EU training can be divided into the general, interdepartmental, and specific training of target groups, following the training needs and the role of each target group in the process of European integration. In terms of general and interdepartmental training, every civil servant must possess a general knowledge of the main policy, institutions, and systems of the EU, as well as Macedonian policy and strategy in relation to the EU. General training should focus on five main areas: training related to know-how and facts related to the EU; training on administrative procedures; training related to the policy and strategy of the Republic of North Macedonia for European integration; training related to the impact of the EU on Macedonian society; and training related to inter-cultural communication. The specific training according to the target group should be oriented towards eleven areas, namely: civil servants who are involved in legal procedures; coordinators of European integration at the national level;

civil servants participating in pre-accession and accession negotiations; civil servants participating in EU working groups, as well as specialists in relevant subjects; senior officials (who do not participate in negotiating delegations); civil servants of local government and organisations of local government; civil servants responsible for training management; civil servants responsible for public opinion and distribution of information; judges; translators and interpreters; and trainers and other civil servants involved in the European integration process. The choice of training methods must follow the needs of the target groups, and that will be determined by analyses and evaluations of the effectiveness of the training. In the analysis of training adapted to Macedonian civil servants, the following methods and forms can be identified: formal training; study stays in the institutions of the European Union, Member States or associated states; participation in international conferences, seminars and workshops, individual learning and practice, and learning through work.

The relevance and usability of this Strategy for the training of civil servants for EU integration demonstrate its high quality and solid concept. However, a certain revision of some segments of this Strategy is necessary (especially with regard to the institutional infrastructure responsible for its implementation, but also to the coordination and monitoring of civil servants), in order to fulfil the criteria for the existence of a European state administration in the Republic of North Macedonia and to meet the dynamic changes taking place within the European Union. It is also necessary to outline new short-term, medium-term, and long-term strategies, due to the changes made in the years and even decades after the adoption of the Strategy, but it is also necessary to establish new tasks and activities of the civil servants in charge of EU integration. If all these modifications are implemented, the creation of a modern Strategy will be achieved, which will be identical or similar to the strategies of the other candidate countries for entry into the European Union.

Conclusions

Each piece of reform, no matter the area and topic connected with the reform process, is a long-lasting, not always pleasant, and sometimes painful step for every democratic society. Bearing in mind the transition period for North Macedonia from the 1990s, we can note that the public administration was not treated as a priority issue at the beginning of the independence period, but even almost ten years later. Also, another peculiarity is that these reforms come as an outcome of the external pressure exerted by the European Union and other relevant organisations

and entities. Namely, the Process of the Stabilization and Association in some way forced North Macedonia to start with the reform processes regarding the public administration, but also judicial reforms, not only because of the established Madrid criteria in 1995, but also because of the necessity of adequate institutional preparing for future EU membership.

The governments in North Macedonia launched the first public administration strategy in 1999, and, after that, have been continuously updating, upgrading, and improving subsequent strategies, specifically in 2010 and 2018, and with the newest strategy in 2022 still in the preparation stages of enactment.

Of course, reform activities and efforts should not be motivated only by North Macedonia's process of accession towards the European Union, but also because of the need for an effective, efficient, economic, responsive, transparent, and accountable public administration which will be service-oriented to the users, i.e., the citizens, and it will be a crucial tool not only for the integration processes towards the EU and other international organisations and entities, but also for the participation in the European Union institutions and bodies post accession.

We can conclude that some steps forward have been made regarding the improvement of the capacities and performances of the Macedonian public administration during recent years and decades, but this is still only the beginning of a long and testing process for the creation of a truly functional public administration in North Macedonia.

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Risk Factors for Religious Radicalism and Violent Religious Extremism – The Case of the Republic of North Macedonia

Abstract
This paper addresses the problem that societies have with identifying the risk factors for religious radicalisation that lead to violent, religious extremism and terrorism and their incorporation into national strategies to combat extremism and terrorism. For a closer study of the problem, the etiology of violent extremism and radicalisation as a process will be considered. The authors used desk literature and report-analysis methods, with a special focus on European Union reports, the National Strategy for suppression of violent extremism, and reports from Macedonian authorities.
The most common factors at a central level in North Macedonia are those located between attacking religious groups and views as push factors, and the lack of cooperation and trust between ethnic communities as a pull factor. At a local level, those factors include religious marginalisation and pressure by religious leaders as push factors, and unemployment, distrust between local authorities, policies, and local people as pull factors.
The paper provides an organisational overview of the most common push and pull factors that could lead to violent extremism using European and

national documents. It could help with more in-depth, complex research of this phenomenon's etiology in the future.

Keywords: Violent Extremism, Radicalism, Terrorism, Factors

Introduction

The abuse and the misinterpretation of religion are widely blamed for much of the violence in our world, both today and in the past. After all, as reports from the Global Index of Terrorism (the Institute for Economics & Peace) have stated for the last few years, violent religious extremism is a major factor in terrorist attacks, since most attacks have been performed in recent years by terrorist groups with a religious ideology. The defenders of religion claim that most of the so-called conflicts and incidents in the name of the religion are actually ethnic, political, nationalistic, and territorial, and exploit religion for its own purposes.

It could be argued that peace and reconciliation are at the core of all religions, but too often they appear to exacerbate conflicts. There are many reasons for this situation. The sociologist Douglas Marshall has described religion in terms of belief, behaviour, and affiliation. But other authors have suggested that different religions combine different degrees or accents of these factors. Broadly defining a threat as "religious (Islamic) extremism" without specifying exactly what that means is to make a big mistake (Rosen, 2017).

Radicalisation generally refers to a process through which individuals or groups move closer to adopting extremist views or violence. This seemingly simple assertion is made complex by the contention surrounding what it means to be radicalised, what the causes of radicalisation are, and what constitutes extremism. A major point of divergence in determining what it means to be radicalised revolves around the issues of whether the endpoint of radicalisation is cognitive or behavioural. The principal conceptual fault-line is between the notions of radicalisation that emphasise extremist beliefs ("cognitive radicalisation") and those that focus on extremist behaviour ("behavioural radicalisation") (Rosen, 2017). That is, whether being radicalised means one ascribes to an extremist ideology, or whether it requires that one is prepared to adopt violence as a tool to further ideological/political aims. This distinction is rather significant, as it determines whether we are concerned with – and therefore seek to prevent – violent action, or whether the holding of extreme ideas in itself, regardless of action taken, is the outcome we seek to prevent (Stephens, Sieckelinck, 2021).

Extremist ideologies and worldviews lead individuals to accept and justify violence through their propaganda. It is simplistic rhetoric, closer to the people, distorting the reality of conflicts around the world and using those conflicts as alleged evidence of the clash between values and social choices. Therefore, radicalisation, along with religious and violent extremism, will continue to be issues of concern for today's societies.

In order to create effective strategies and approaches to deal with this problem, one must first accurately identify the factors that guide individuals on the path to radicalisation. There are significant challenges in this process of identification. Although there are a number of recurring causes for radicalisation and violent extremism, different individuals have different motives for engaging in such behaviour, making it difficult to determine exactly when the alarm should sound as far as family, friends, or the authorities are concerned. There are many ways to investigate the root causes of violent extremism, but there is no single cause for the path to radicalisation and violent extremism. There is a wide range of factors at the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of analysis. Previous research on terrorism has shown that neither poverty nor socio-economic deprivation are direct causes of terrorism. Existing research has focused mainly on contexts outside the EU and has provided broad categories that are not in line with radicalisation or violent extremism in Europe.

Design and Approach

The research on the etiology of violent religious extremism is actually focused on what might push an individual towards an increased or decreased risk of becoming radicalised. This refers to the risk and protection factors that influence the occurrence of violent religious extremism. A risk factor is something that increases the likelihood that someone will become radicalised with violent extremist tendencies, and conversely, a protection factor is something that reduces the likelihood that someone will become radicalised in the same way. There is more research on the risk factors than on the protective factors associated with the such radicalisation, but researchers are increasingly emphasising the importance of their joint assessment because focusing only on the risks can create general findings based on stereotypes rather than on reality.

In this direction, it is necessary to analyse both the risk factors and the protective factors that are related to whether an individual is radicalised into violent extremism for religious reasons. In some cases, these risk factors and protective factors result from analysis comparing individuals involved in extremist violence with control groups of individuals not involved. In

these cases, there is evidence that hypothesised risk factors (or the lack of protective factors) are more likely to be associated with violent outcomes and, equally importantly, protective factors (or the absence of risk factors) are more likely to be associated with non-violent results. In other cases, no comparative or control groups were included in the analyses. The risk factors were determined by focusing only on individuals who radicalised violence, and protective factors were determined by focusing only on individuals who did not radicalise violence. The scientific significance of these risks and protective factors obtained without comparison or control group is unclear.

Focusing on risk and protection factors could not only improve the accuracy of the risk assessments; it could also provide additional opportunities to design successful interventions that prevent and counter the radicalisation of violent religious extremism.

A related topic of discussion is on whether useful indicators that an individual is radicalised into violent extremism are possible to be detected. Although the risk factor increases the likelihood that an individual will be radicalised by violent extremism, an indicator could provide information on whether that individual is radicalised by violent extremism. Another aspect refers to the need for examining more risk and protection factors together, as opposed to looking at isolationary methods. The idea that the mere presence of a risk or protection factor will be sufficient to establish that an individual is likely to become radicalised into violent extremism is considered too simplistic and potentially dangerous.

The growing number of people born and/or raised in Western Europe who are attracted by militant Islam also deserves special scientific attention and further in-depth research. The growing number of Western Muslims joining insurgents abroad poses perhaps a greater threat than returnees planning to engage in domestic terrorism. According to one study (Yusoufzai, Emmerling, 2017), the destruction of Muslim-majority countries, in part because of Western foreign policy, is at the root of today's Islamic terrorism. However, this does not explain why only a small portion of the world's Muslim population embraces militant Islam. The question that arises here is this: Why do some people become radicalised and engage in violent behaviour in the name of Islam, justifying the killing of innocent civilians? In order to answer this question, the factors that contribute to a change in the consciousness of radicalised individuals and the resulting occurrence of violent behaviour need to be clarified. An investigation into terrorist behaviour and its causes is only a single step towards finding solutions and possible preventive measures for this world phenomenon. The paper further seeks to determine whether the

factors that contribute to Western Muslims joining Islamic extremist organisations and engaging in terrorist violence in the West (including Europe, the United States, and Canada) can be identified. Four factors are discussed, and they are:

1) identity crisis,
2) relative deprivation,
3) personal characteristics,
4) and empathy.

Firstly, identity crisis is discussed with a focus on the struggle of the Western Muslim to maintain a balance between different cultural aspects of identity.

Secondly, relative deprivation is considered; it is emphasised that the national as well as the international level of deprivation experienced by the Muslim population both play a major role in creating the narrative that the religion of Islam and the Muslim community are under attack.

Thirdly, the focus is on multiple individual factors; personal characteristics, such as narcissistic and sensitive traits, that may have helped some Western Muslims resort to violence and terrorism.

Lastly, empathy is discussed; as Western Muslims return to their respective homelands to commit acts of terror, they seem to empathise strongly with the Muslim population, which is considered their group, while at the same time showing a complete lack of empathy for the innocent civilians killed in the terrorist attacks they carry out.

Serge Garcet (Garcet, 2021) analysed personal factors for radicalisation that lead to violent extremism that include individual psychological characteristics that make a person more vulnerable (mental health conditions, depression, trauma), personality traits, and individual demographic characteristics.

Michael Wolfowicz at al. identified 101 individual level factors for radical attitudes, 45 for radical intentions, and 33 for radical behaviours. The factors can be grouped into five domains:

1) socio-demographic and background factors,
2) psychological and personality trait factors,
3) attitudinal and subjective belief-related factors,
4) experiential factors,
5) and the criminogenic and criminotrophic, factors known for fostering or protecting against a range of deviant outcomes, both cognitive and behavioural.

They found that some of the factors most central to risk assessment and counter radicalisation interventions actually have relatively insignificant relationships with radicalisation outcomes. Conversely, factors known to

be associated with ordinary criminal outcomes have the most significant relationships. These findings suggest the need for moving towards weighted risk assessment instruments and alternative interventions. Additionally, the discovery of differences in the magnitude of the effects for different factors according to regional context suggest that risk assessment and interventions may be tailored to local contexts.

Religious Radicalisation Leading to Violent Extremism

Radicalisation is a dynamic process that can occur in many different circumstances and at a different speed. Every case of terrorist radicalisation and recruiting is a result of a unique intersection of environmental factors with personal circumstances and the psychology of the individuals (OSCE, 2014).

Radicalisation, for the purpose of this paper, is defined as a set of complex causal processes in which multiple factors work together to produce extremist outcomes, leading to the assumption and acceptance of terrorist narratives and ideologies, along with the violent activities stemming therefrom.

Radicalisation is seen as a process wherein a person increasingly accepts the use of violence to achieve certain political, ideological, or religious goals. The process of radicalisation that results in violent extremism is, according to the Action Plan against Radicalisation and Violent Extremism, characterised by:

• cognitive development towards a stable, one-sided perception of reality, where there is no room for alternative perspectives;

• further development wherein the perception of reality is experienced so acutely and seriously that violent actions seem necessary and just.

It is important to acknowledge that not everybody who assumes radical ideas becomes violent or a terrorist (Yayla, 2021). Vergani and his colleagues (Vergani et al., 2018) categorise two different types of radicalisation that result in violent extremism. They distinguish between "studies that focus on behavioural radicalisation (which focuses on an individual's engagement in violent action) and cognitive radicalisation (which focuses on an individual's adoption and internalisation of violent and extremist beliefs)".

Given the basic characteristics of terrorist recruitment and acting with all their complexities, certain terrorist activities would be possible only if their internal organisation has a built-in policy of radicalisation of membership and new recruits. It stems from the use of political and cultural violence where such a strategy can only be fulfilled by a radicalised "fighter". Modern analysis of terrorism pays great attention

to the phenomenon of radicalisation which is closely related to the recruitment process (Zirojevic, 2014, p. 214). Recruiters try to make them true believers in their ideology – or at least the non-violent version of it. Nevertheless, in most cases, terrorist organisations and their violent activities are not introduced nor mentioned during this stage; rather, the general concepts of terrorist ideologies are introduced. For leftist terrorist organisations, indoctrination involves Marxist ideology and thought; for the Salafi jihadist terrorist organisations, the discussion revolves around Salafism and Wahhabism without reference to terrorist organisations. In the past, terrorist organisations have used traditional media, such as television, radio, leaflets, print newspapers, and face-to-face conversations, to conduct their own psychological operations.

With the advancement of technology, i.e., the development of internet communication and propaganda techniques, the possibility for faster and simpler contact between the extremists and a targeted population has increased and been facilitated. In the past two decades, the Internet has become an indispensable tool in extremist strategy. In this regard, it can be mentioned that radicalisation and recruitment are done through social networks and other Internet applications and platforms (Gordana, 2016, p. 28).

For example, Islamic State (ISIS) is known for posting videos on YouTube and Twitter, and has mastered new technologies and social media platforms such as Telegram to promote their messages and recruit new members in cyberspace. At the same time, cases of self-radicalisation through the access and use of extremist internet channels are known, but we are also aware of cases of self-radicalisation through written literature.

In this regard, whilst terrorist propaganda will often depict violent behaviour such as beheadings with the intention of coercion or to encourage that such violence is imitated by others, some propaganda now also focuses on brand management, through the portrayal of a narrative that aims to attract individuals to their cause. Such narratives can take two approaches (or a combination of both): that which focuses on personal incentives for joining a group (pull factors) and that which emphasises or exaggerates the negative social, political, and/or economic conditions of a target population (push factors), thereby contributing towards a fertile environment for recruitment (Zieger, Gyte, 2021, p. 361).

Findings

The EU Counter-Radicalisation Strategy

To improve policies to prevent radicalisation and recruitment in terrorism, the European Union first adopted a strategy and action plan in 2005 to combat radicalisation and recruitment for terrorism. The strategy was updated in November 2008, and last updated in May 2014.

To counter radicalisation and the recruitment of terrorists, The (Council of the European Union, 2014) EU Strategy covers:

- The promotion of security, justice, and equal opportunities for all.
- Ensuring that voices of mainstream opinion prevail over those of extremism.
- The enhancement of government communications.
- Supporting messages which counter terrorism.
- Countering online radicalisation and recruitment to terrorism.
- Training, building capacity and engaging first-line practitioners across relevant sectors.
- Supporting individuals and civil society to build resilience.
- Supporting disengagement initiatives.
- Supporting further research into the trends and challenges of radicalisation and recruitment to terrorism.
- Aligning internal and external counter-radicalisation work.

Table 1: A Classification of the Relation Between the Causes and Catalysts of Radicalisation and Relevant EU Policies (Radicalisation, Recruitment and the EU Counter-radicalisation Strategy, Transnational Terrorism, Security & Rule of Law)

Degree of overlap	Causes			Catalysts
	External	Social	Individual	
High	Political causes; Cultural causes; Network dynamics			Recruitment
Medium	Economic causes	Social identification; Relative deprivation		Trigger events
Low			Psychological characteristics; Personal experiences; Rationality	

Source: European Commission (2022b)

In 2011, the EU launched the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), which now links more than 6,000 practitioners (police officers, prison and probation staff, teachers, youth workers, civil society representatives, academics, etc.) from all over Europe. In October 2015, the RAN Centre of Excellence was established as an EU knowledge hub, fostering the exchange of best practices. Most recently, a new structure – the Steering Board on Radicalisation – was created as part of an EU Cooperation Mechanism to improve coordination between all relevant stakeholders. In its efforts to prevent the dissemination of terrorist propaganda online and to increase the volume of alternative narratives, in 2015 the EU launched the EU internet forum, bringing together a number of major internet industry players. In 2018, the Commission proposed binding legislation on the removal of terrorist content online.

Between 2011 and 2013, the EU adopted approximately 239 counter-terrorism measures, focusing on the external dimension, in which religion was circumscribed to inter-faith and inter-religious dialogue within the framework of European cultural diplomacy. However, the gradual evolution of the EU strategy, and its formal reform in 2014, acknowledged the rise of internal threats and the necessity to address religion more directly, as a multi-dimensional phenomenon. This shift led to a proliferation of the institutional actors involved, as well as to the empowerment of civil society in the counter-radicalisation effort (Foret, Markoviti, 2019, p. 7).

This renewed salience of religion became particularly clear in the EU Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism revised in May 2014 (para. 20). The response to the challenge set by religiously motivated terrorism required dialogue between public authorities and the various social, cultural and religious groups concerned. This Strategy referred to the need to support civil society to make it more resilient to radical propaganda, as well as to the training of teachers and religious leaders as those first-line workers who may be able to identify signs of radicalisation at an early stage.

The prevention of radicalisation is one of the central aspects of the EU counter-terrorism efforts. Online radicalisation will be at the heart of EU intervention, with new legislation (currently being finalised) to ensure the swift removal of terrorist material, but also with future plans to make major internet platforms more accountable when it comes to combating illegal and harmful online content (through the Digital Services Act). Moreover, the new European action plan for integration and inclusion, presented in November 2020, would also contribute to prevention efforts, assuming that a more cohesive and inclusive society can help prevent the

spread of extremist ideologies leading to terrorism and violent extremism (Voronova, 2021, p. 11).

The terrorist attacks that shook Europe in 2020 accelerated the Commission's plans, which led to the adoption of a new EU counter-terrorism agenda in December 2020 around four pillars – anticipation, prevention, protection, and response.

The Strategy for Preventing Risk Factors for Violent Extremism in the Republic of North Macedonia

The complexity of the problem of violent extremism and terrorism exceeds the competences of the following authorised institutions and requires the need for coordinated and synchronised action. For that reason, with the decision of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, on July 25, 2017, a National Committee for the Prevention of Violent Extremism and the Fight against Terrorism was formed. The Committee has a coordinating role in recognising and opposing all forms of extremism leading to terrorism. Presented by the National Coordinator and its two thematic deputies, the role of the Committee consists of the collecting, analysing, and timely exchange of information not only with the competent, relevant institutions, but also those from other spheres outside the umbrella of security (education, social, civil sector, religious communities, local self-government, and others). In the process of coordination, the National Coordinator participates in the proper and adequate allocation of resources, strategic and counter-strategic planning and synchronisation of the cooperation with the relevant international institutions within its competence. Among other things, the National coordinator, through the preparation and implementation of action plans, scientific research, and the conducting of training sessions to aid the recognition of radicalisation, is a key factor in the creation of national strategies for the prevention of violent extremism and the fight against terrorism (Babanoski et al., 2019, p. 24).

In the Republic of North Macedonia, according to the National Strategy for the Prevention of Violent Extremism, it is stated that there are no relevant statistics on the ways of individual radicalisation, but that qualitative research suggests certain "push" and "pull" factors, i.e., pushing factors and pulling factors.

In order to better respond to the complexity of the fight against terrorism and extremism, the Macedonian authorities in 2017 established the National Committee for the Prevention of Violent Extremism and the Fight against Terrorism. This concept opens a new chapter in the fight against terrorism and violent extremism in the Republic of

Table 2: The Push and Pull Factors of Violent Extremism

	Factors that push (push)	Factors that pull (pull)
State level	- The tendency to have unfounded accusations levelled at ethnic communities and religious groups	- North Macedonia continues to fight to build and nurture a strong, unified national identity
	- Government rhetoric that shifts the blame for certain phenomena in society on targeted groups, instead of focusing on the real factors and indicators	- North Macedonia still suffers from a relatively high degree of dissatisfaction and lack of trust between communities, the state, and local authorities
	- There is no comprehensive mission to prevent all forms of radicalisation, violent extremism and the fight against terrorism	- A lack of institutional capacity and capabilities of state and municipal authorities, persistent challenges with corruption
Municipal and local level	- Pressure from religious leaders (internal or external influence)	- Chronic unemployment and underemployment, especially in ethnocultural and religious minority communities
	- The marginalisation of ethnic/religious groups	- Low levels of trust between local police and local authorities regarding the rule of law
	- Lack of opportunities, the denial of citizenship to certain groups, inability to integrate and receive government protections and services, including police protection, health care, etc.	- The lack and weakness of the „legitimate" leader creates vacuums that easily fill radical extremist leaders with violent anti-state and anti-national visions and intentions

Source: MK Government, 2018.

North Macedonia where the emphasis is placed on the need for greater coordination and involvement of all the institutions in the system. This body aims to increase the efficiency and coordination of those institutions and their activities in order to more successfully and efficiently deal with and prevent violent extremism and terrorism. As a result of this cooperation, the monitoring and evaluation of the activities envisaged in the National Action Plan, in the area of the prevention of and the dealing with violent extremism in the Republic of North Macedonia is planned to be facilitated.

In 2018, two strategic documents were presented in the forms of the National Strategy for Prevention of Violent Extremism (2018–2022) (MK

Government, 2018) and the National Strategy for Combating Terrorism (2018–2022) (MK Government, 2018), and both came together with action plans. The separation of these two separate, strategic documents stems from the essential difference between violent extremism and terrorism, as well as the forms of reaction aimed at combating them. These strategic documents describe all forms of terrorist threats, in addition to the frequent manifestations of violent extremism, presented as a suitable basis for radicalisation that leads to terrorism. At the same time, the phenomenon of the recruitment of „foreign fighters" is not left out, which, although with reduced intensity, is still present on the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia.

The strategies focus on measures to combat violent extremism and terrorism in terms of prevention, defence, the protection of citizens and property, criminal prosecution, the remediation of the consequences of a terrorist attack, coordination, and national and international cooperation. The commitment of the Republic of North Macedonia is reflected in the monitoring of the plans, conceptions, and policies of the EU and NATO, as well as compliance with the resolutions and framework conventions on terrorism, the Council of Europe, as well as regional initiatives.

The National Committee for the Prevention of Violent Extremism and Counter-Terrorism, in cooperation with the OSCE, has recently organised a series of roundtables across the country to raise awareness of national counter-terrorism strategies and counter-violence extremism plans and the affirmation of action plans. Also, in cooperation with international donors, the National Committee for the Prevention of Violent Extremism and the Fight against Terrorism has supported a number of projects aimed at recognising the "early signs of radicalisation and building community resistance to terrorist ideas" through training and engaging young people, parents, educators, and law enforcement officers.

When defining the new structure for collecting, analysing, and disseminating information on national security, one cannot avoid questions about how to improve security, and how not to violate or abuse human rights and freedoms. Vigorous, spirited public debates are essential for answering these questions. Clear guidelines formulated in the hearing process can provide public confidence in new policies. Information technology can provide tools which could minimise these conflicts, foster co-operation, and help with the assurance that the right information should come to the right people at the right time. The procedures that provide accountability and oversight can make sure that lessons from previous experiences strengthen the country's information strategies to combat terrorism. The intelligence services should constantly

adapt to any new needs in the context of the global campaign against terrorism. Renewed emphasis should be placed on human intelligence through the use of information technology, for the purpose of improved analysis and cooperation with law enforcement agencies, as well as real-time intelligence on terrorist activities. This is necessary in order to take elimination measures against those persons for whom there is compelling information about their connection with the planning and preparation of generally hazardous actions (Ilijevski et al., 2019, p. 11).

Findings and Originality

There has been little evidence offered upon which the identification of universal and context-specific factors can be made. Different authors examine different theses and give different and/or similar conclusions. Based on their research, risk factors are grouped at different levels: macro-, meso-, and micro factors; exogenous and endogenous; social, environmental factors and individual, etc.

Considering the predisposing risk factors, one must be warned that it would be a mistake to consider the risk factors in isolation, i.e., on their own, because no single factor can adequately explain the process of radicalisation towards violent extremism. Therefore, factors need to be considered in combination with how they affect each other and thus together how they affect individuals in order to understand the process that leads to violent activity. In addition, these factors are believed to be prominent and most influential during the initial contact of persons and related involvement in the process of radicalisation, with further group influences taking on an important role and intensifying the process when a person moves towards joining a terrorist group (i.e., group dynamics, ideological control, leadership influences, etc.). According to this, the radicalisation of violence has a complex, multifaceted, and multidimensional nature.

The complexity and uniqueness of causal factors of radicalisation signal that it is hard to define social groups that are vulnerable to radicalisation. Furthermore, research with the intention of profiling specific "ideal types" of individuals, who are more susceptible to violent radicalisation, seems futile.

Terrorist-and-terrorism-related experiences along with law enforcement practices from previous years throughout the world have revealed that countering radicalisation and the recruitment of individuals into terrorist groups effectively requires a balanced approach between existing security-related measures and institutional efforts to tackle those factors that may

create an environment conductive to radicalisation that leads to violent extremism and terrorism.

Religious tolerance and respect for diversity are basic principles that should be nurtured in a multicultural, multi-confessional society like ours, and it is necessary to prevent all attempts to create intolerance or religious hatred among citizens. Such preventative measures and efforts can help to stifle the process of religious radicalisation and violent religious extremism.

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Election Regulations: How Can Citizen Involvement Be Increased? The Macedonian Case[1]

Abstract
In its thirty years of parliamentary experience, the Macedonian electoral model has undergone several changes. The majority model was part of the political system in two election cycles, and, according to the mixed model, deputies were elected only once, while the proportional model has been present for the longest time and, as regards that particular model, seven election cycles have been held. The longer application of the proportional model gives room for an analysis of its influence on the voters' behaviour; those who are actually the only bearers of sovereignty.
The data from the voter turnout show a decrease in citizen interest in participating in this process, while the data from the research that will be presented in this paper show great dissatisfaction both with the deputies who are supposed to represent the interests of the citizens, and with the political parties themselves. The methodological approach is based on a secondary analysis of the data. Part of the used data are the results of the author's previous research activity.
Based on the detected shortcomings, this paper aims to offer a new model that, in the future, should increase the involvement of North Macedonia's citizens in the electoral process.

Keywords: Voter Turnout, Electoral Systems, Macedonian Electoral Model, Electoral Behaviour, German Model, North Macedonia

[1] The views of the author are also presented in other scientific papers.

Introduction

In retrospect, the development of North Macedonia's political system does not coincide with a single, rounded ideological concept. In fact, we are talking about two completely divergent political and electoral systems. Specifically, we are talking about the one-party electoral system, which coincides with the duration of the socialist model of democracy, and the multi-party electoral system, which appears in a completely new political context in the form of the model of plural democracy. The electoral system of North Macedonia, as a subsystem of the Yugoslav political system, followed the Yugoslavian developmental path until the country's dissolution. More precisely, in the time span from 1946 to 1990, two completely different electoral models were manifested: the one-party (non-competitive) electoral system, which was part of the wider and unique Yugoslav electoral system, and the multi-party (competitive) electoral system of Macedonia, which is a fully developed, independent entity as the electoral system of a separate, independent state (Jovevska, 1999).

Such changes were the basis for conducting general, secret, and direct multi-party elections and with them the application of the representative parliamentary system began. With these changes, the process of transition began, from one social order to another. At the beginning of this process, in addition to the first multi-party elections, a referendum on independence, the declaration of independence, and the process of adopting the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia followed thereafter.

The introduction of these changes also paved the way for the emergence of new political parties. The search for an appropriate model for the representation of citizens, as seen from the first parliamentary elections in 1990 to this day, was accompanied by a change in the electoral model. The elections in 1990 and 1994 were organised according to the majority model, the elections in 1998 according to the mixed model, while the elections from 2002 to the present day have been organised according to the proportional model. Despite these changes, there are still problems that exist which could only be overcome by changing the election regulations again. The argument for building a new model stems from the analysis of data from several surveys. Consequently, the main research question focuses on increasing voter turnout, which means a greater legitimacy of the elected deputies to make decisions on behalf of the citizens.

Voter Turnout – Parliamentary Elections in North Macedonia

Turnout is one of the most important topics in the focus of political science. This is the way in which citizens transfer their sovereignty to

their future representatives, and in order for this process to be democratic, it assumes the active involvement of a country's citizens in that process. The variability of voter turnout from cycle to cycle, as well as from country to country, is in the research focus' scope of many authors.

Professor Mark N Franklin links the drop in turnout to the decline in the importance of elections, in terms of the turnout trend from the 1950s to the end of the last century. While elections in the post-World War II period resolved major issues that posed issues in society, with the reduction of class conflict, voters have had less incentive to vote on election day (Hague, Harop, 2007). He also points out the change in the decision to vote, i.e., from group-and-party voting which is characteristic of the post-war period, to voting on issues, the economy, leaders and party competencies. According to the political scientist Pippa Norris, this decline is due to reduced voter satisfaction with governmental achievements. Anthony Downs pointed out that turnout is higher in countries where the voting effort is small (due to an easy registration process) and the potential gains are large (Hague, Harrop, 2007).

According to Franklin's analysis, the short period between elections and the predictability of the election result actually reduce voter turnout. In addition, Peter Mayer points out that the sooner elections are held, the more unpredictable the results are. According to the economist Benny Geys, voter turnout is higher in countries with historically higher turnout, in countries with smaller populations, in elections where results are expected to be "tight", where parties spend more money on campaigning, in proportional electoral systems, along with where voter registration is easy, and where elections take place at the same time (Bale, 2009).

According to Norris, institutional context and cultural factors equally contribute to explaining voter turnout. In countries subject to voter turnout comparison, where all other things are equal in terms of political institutions, the turnout is likely to be maximised in elections using the proportional representation model, with small constituencies, regular but relatively rare national competitions, and competitive party systems. But even if the institutional context is controlled, there are significant inequalities in participation in elections related to human development, socio-economic resources, and cultural attitudes. In any society, those citizens who are more educated, richer, and more motivated are more likely to participate in elections than others, and activism is higher in post-industrial nations (Norris, 2004).

The abovementioned aspects that have an impact on voter turnout can be found in one place in a publication by a group of authors under the title, "Engaging the Electorate: Initiatives to Promote Voter Turnout from

Around the World". They recognise two groups of factors; (1) contextual and systemic factors, and (2) individual and social factors. In the first group of factors, namely the contextual ones, there are mentioned: the perception of the effectiveness of the political contest (the degree to which citizens believe that different election outcomes affect governance); the competitiveness and importance of the election (if the election result is believed to be tight, voters may view election day as significant); the nature of the party system (the degree of fragmentation can provide a variety of options for voters, although strong fragmentation can have the opposite effect, leaving voters confused about the effect their vote may have); higher spending on an election campaign (which may raise the profile of elections and lead to a wider distribution of political information); voting traditions in different communities (the emergence of „safe" places may reduce voter turnout or certain communities may be a particularly lucrative target for different interest groups or political parties); strategic voting (voters may be more willing to go out to prevent an adverse outcome); the duration between elections (when elections are held frequently, voter turnout suffers); the weather (extreme weather conditions can affect turnout); and the nature of the election event itself (the turnout in referendums and when voting for a civic initiative is usually lower than in national elections, but there are exceptions).

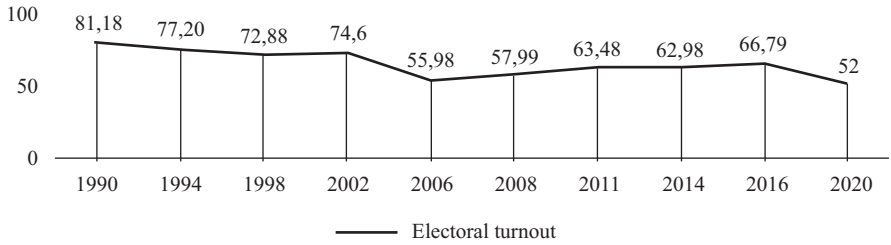
Systemic or institutional elements are generally more stable and often require significant legislative and administrative change-based efforts. Examples of systemic factors are: the electoral system (the more the electoral system reflects the citizens' choice, the higher the turnout is); voter registration as a state or individual responsibility; mandatory versus voluntary voting (turnout is higher when there is mandatory voting and a sanction); one vs. multiple voting days; elections held on a working day or a day off (turnout is higher when voting takes place on holidays or weekends); the availability of alternative voting procedures (advance voting, proxy voting, postal voting, etc. allows voters who may not be able to vote on election day to vote in advance); physical access to polling stations; and the use of new technologies (electronic voting).

In the group of individual and social factors, the following can be mentioned: age (turnout is lowest amongst the youngest of a population), the level of education (there is generally a positive correlation between education level and electoral turnout); gender; interest in politics; networking; socialisation; and others.

When it comes to voter turnout in North Macedonia, the data show a significant decline. While in the first election cycles since independence, the trend was over 70%. In the last 20 years, it has ranged from 56% to

67%, whereas in the last parliamentary elections (which were the first to be held in pandemic conditions) it was 52% (Figure 1). Although in theory the proportional model has a positive effect on voter turnout, in North Macedonia's case, from the data shown it can be seen that only the turnout in the first elections according to the proportional model in 2002 was high, but not higher than in the elections organised according to the majority model. A greater reduction is evident in relation to the other election cycles organised according to the proportional model. This situation is the basis for further analysis in order to detect the reasons for it.

Figure 1: Voter Turnout – Parliamentary Elections in Norh Macedonia



Source: International IDEA.

Changes in the Electoral System

In the 1990 and 1994 elections, the process of electing deputies was carried out according to the majority electoral model, where the territory was divided into 120 electoral units. In these election cycles, the elections take place in two electoral rounds. In the first of the two, all registered candidates for MPs compete, while in the second, only the two candidates who win the most votes in the first round are voted upon. Taking into account the shortcomings arising from this model and considering that a proportional component should be added to the electoral model, the first major changes to the electoral system are taking place.

At the 1998 elections, the mixed model was introduced, according to which 85 MPs were elected according to the majority and 35 according to the proportional model, for which the entire territory represented one electoral unit. Additionally, an electoral threshold of 5% was introduced for the proportional list, so, in order for a party to become part of the Macedonian parliament – known as "the Assembly", it had to win at least 5% of the total number of voters who voted in the elections. According to

this method, only one election was organised, which did not really provide any real opportunity for a more detailed analysis of the effects of the model itself, both in relation to the voters and in relation to the political parties themselves. In the meantime, a military conflict took place in 2001, which also marked the moment an announcement was made regarding a new change in the electoral regulation in the direction of a more appropriate representation of the smaller, ethnic communities in the Assembly.

The elections in 2002 were organised according to the proportional electoral model in 6 constituencies, and 20 MPs were elected from each constituency. The D'Hondt formula is used to calculate mandates, and an electoral threshold is not provided. This particular way of electing deputies is practiced to this day, i.e., seven elections have been held according to this formula. The twenty-year practice of the proportional model provides an opportunity to detect its shortcomings in order to build a more appropriate model that will aim to raise the level of citizen participation in this process.

General Problems

As far as the existing electoral model and its effects are concerned, three general problems can be detected connected to the equal value of each vote; the lack of appropriate representation of the political parties in the Assembly; and citizens' dissatisfaction with their representation by the political parties, and the deputies in the Assembly.

Although the proportional model hints at an adequate representation of the will of the citizens, the electoral dimensions can cause a different effect. The D'Hondt formula by definition favours the larger political parties, and its replacement, for example, with the Hare quota in certain election cycles, would mean a different composition of the Macedonian Assembly with a greater presence of small parties. But in terms of the equal value of each vote, this is not a problem. The division of the territory into 6 constituencies has a greater negative effect, that is, the different turnout in each of the constituencies actually results in an unequal value of each vote. According to the data from the last elections, on average, to become a deputy from the fourth constituency, about 8,500 votes were needed (where there was the highest turnout), while about 6,190 votes were needed to become a member of parliament from the sixth constituency (where there was the lowest turnout).

The division into 6 constituencies has an effect on the political parties themselves in addition to their representation in the Assembly. For example, in the 2006 elections, the VMRO-People's Party, with a total of

57,077 votes, won 6 parliamentary seats, and the New Social Democratic Party, with 56,624 votes, won 7 parliamentary mandates (Naumovska, 2011). The inappropriate distribution of mandates can also be seen in relation to the last parliamentary elections held in 2020, where the Left party, with a total of 37,426, votes won only 2 mandates, and the Alliance of Albanians/Alternative coalition with 81,620 votes provided 12 deputies (Atanasov, Dimitrievski, 2022). The simple calculation shows that 18,713 voters voted for one MP from the Left party, while only 6,801 voted for one MP from the AA/A coalition. According to this, it follows that if a party does not have a concentration of votes in the electoral units, a large number of lost votes occur. This situation has its effect on a part of the electorate, so according to them, if there is a model that guarantees the value of each vote, it would act as an encouragement to vote for a smaller party because their vote would not be lost (Naumovska et al., 2022).

In addition to voting as a process, the citizens clearly express their dissatisfaction with the current political situation, which can be seen from the data that follow. According to data from the Institute for Democracy regarding a survey of public opinion in 2021, it can be seen that the citizens believe that the focus of the MPs is not on the interests of the people at all, but the MPs' behaviour is mostly guided by party and personal interests. More specifically, 76% of the respondents believe that MPs always represent the interests of their political parties, while 70% believe they always represent their personal interests, and 57% believe they always represent someone's business interests. At the bottom of the scale are the interests of the citizens, for which only 10% of the respondents believe are always properly represented by the deputies. (Rechica, Jovevska Gjorgjevikj, 2021). From the same research comes the data that 65% of the respondents think that the deputies are not ready to make decisions on behalf of the citizens, and, in addition, about 60% of the respondents think that by changing the electoral model for the selection of MPs could, as a result, contribute to a higher quality composition of the Parliament.

According to research conducted by the Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical Research on the Views of Citizens and Political Parties on the Change of Election Rules, the conclusions move in the same direction, that is, the data obtained from this research clearly shows the citizens' dissatisfaction with the political situation, as well as the need to change the electoral model.[2] According to the data from this research, in all constituencies, and among all categories of citizens, there is a strong, negative attitude and profound disappointment with the way the deputies

[2] The research was carried out in collaboration with the National Democratic Institute (NDI).

perform their function of representing the interests of the citizens. Most of the people believe that MPs in the Assembly realise their personal and party interests, receive excessive rewards/remunerations for their engagement, are loyal only to the party leaders and do not fulfil the pre-election promises they make to the citizens (Naumovska et al., 2022).

In addition, as a result of the dissatisfaction with the developments in political life on a continuing basis, the attitude of the respondents is that change is needed as regards the election deputies, and that there is general support for ensuring that each vote is of equal value, they think that more space should be left for small political parties, and also that there should be the introduction of one constituency for parliamentary elections.

As it can be seen from the presented data, the problems identified in the Macedonian electoral model are actually identified with the negative characteristics of the proportional model itself. Voting for parties and party lists and not for individuals in itself has the effect of alienating MPs from the voters. It results in the failure to fulfil pre-election promises, and makes the interests of the citizens the last consideration. On the other hand, the role of parties and leaders in the creation of party lists has an effect on MPs in the direction of full support of party interests and obedience to the party leader.

Which General Characteristics Should the Electoral Model Have?

Recently, the author conducted an online survey with the aim of recognising the priorities of citizens in relation to the electoral model, that is, detecting characteristics that are most important according to them. 379 respondents took part in this survey, conducted during the period of November-December 2021. So as to answer question, "What should be the purpose of the electoral model for the election of MPs in the Assembly", several answers were on offer to choose from, and the participants in the survey could choose a maximum of three. According to the general distribution of answers, it can be seen that for the citizens, the most important thing that the electoral model should enable is the responsibility of the deputies to the citizens, but should also ensure the equal value of each vote across the entire territory. The third priority is the appropriate representation of citizens from different regions. Of the offered answers, the lowest priorities for the respondents were the adequate representation of the various ethnic groups, and the provision of a stable government majority.

Table 1: What Should be the Purpose of the Electoral Model for the Election of MPs in the Assembly?

Possible answers	Frequency
To enable the equal value of every vote of the citizens across the entire territory	235
To enable an adequate representation of citizens from different regions	118
To enable an adequate representation of citizens from different ethnic communities	53
To ensure the responsibility of the deputies to the citizens	243
To enable a stable government majority	67
Other -----	6
I don't know/ I can't decide	23

Source: Author's compilation.

Based on the presented data related to the shortcomings of the existing model, but also on the priorities that are important for the citizens, changes in the future should focus on an electoral model that:

– should ensure MP accountability to the citizens;
– should guarantee the equal value of each vote;
– should enable representation of citizens from different regions.

The responsibility of the deputies to the citizens, i.e., their reconnection, will also result in overcoming problems such as fulfilling pre-election promises, representing the interests of the citizens, and also reducing the role of the leaders in the creation of the electoral lists (which could mean the democratisation of the parties themselves).

The equal value of each vote would mean that there would be no lost votes, this change would encourage voters to vote for a party that most closely represents their values and beliefs, and the composition of the Assembly would be in accordance with the expressed will of the voters during an election process.

The model that will enable the representation of citizens from different regions will actually enable the representation of the various interests and needs of the citizens.

The main presented characteristics can be recognised in the German model of electoral system. The members of the Bundestag are elected according to the mixed-member proportional representation system (MMPR), according to which one part is elected from party lists and the other part from uninominal electoral units.

A characteristic of the German electoral system is the double ballot, where, on one side, one vote is given for a specific candidate in the

uninominal electoral units, and on the other side, voters give a second vote to a specific party. According to the majority electoral system, mandates are awarded to 299 representatives who are voted for in the same number of electoral units, and they are considered elected if they win the largest number of votes. These mandates are also called "direct mandates" (Jesse, 1995). The other half, i.e., the remaining 299 MPs, enter the Bundestag through party lists.

According to the second votes won, the number of parliamentary seats that a party gets in the parliament is determined. From the total number of mandates won, the direct mandates won with the first vote of the voters are subtracted. Only the remaining part of mandates is filled with candidates from the party lists. Therefore, the second vote decides how much a party will be represented in the parliament. If a party wins more district seats than the predicted ratio according to the party votes, it keeps the additional seats and the Bundestag is expanded in size (Kreuzer, 2004).

Without taking into account the second vote, that is, without introducing the proportional element, the Bundestag would be completely dominated by the major political parties. The division of the ballot, or, in other words, the possibility to vote for a person on the one hand and for a party on the other, essentially affects the division of votes. Participation in the division of votes is different for each party.

A person voting in single-member constituencies aims to ensure a closer relationship between voters and their representatives. This element helps to bridge the gap between voters and MPs which is usually large in a purely proportional model with closed party lists.

A special feature of the German electoral system is the so-called "surplus seats", whose aim is to ensure proportionality at the national and regional level.

Conclusions

The model of electoral system provides the basis of political life in a country. It regulates the rules according to which the expressed will of the citizens in an electoral process is translated into mandates and their representation in the legislature.

As a result of the Macedonian electoral model, this paper highlights three general shortcomings: the unequal value of each vote; the inadequate representation of the parties in the Assembly in relation to the total number of won votes; and the citizens' dissatisfaction with their representation by the MPs and political parties themselves. From the

presented data, the most important elements that the new model should contain can be clearly seen. The equal value of each vote, together with the responsibility that deputies should have towards the citizens, and the appropriate representation of certain regions in the Assembly are the priorities that should be woven into the future's new legal solutions.

Considering the German model and the priorities that have been highlighted, it can be said that this model is mostly adequate. The equal value of each vote is ensured by a proportional list at the national level, and the possibility of additional seats fully ensures that proportionality. On the other hand, the provision of half of the deputies according to the majority principle ensures a direct connection of the deputies with the voters and their responsibility to the people. The majority principle mostly ensures the third priority highlighted by the respondents.

Due to its proportional dimension, this combined model guarantees the equal value of each vote, provides one the possibility to vote for a smaller party, and adequately distributes the mandates. In contrast, the inclusion of the majority model ensures regional representation and greater accountability of the MPs towards the citizens.

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The Effectiveness and Perspectives of the Macedonian Regional Development Policy: Lessons from Poland

Abstract
Due to the disparities between the socio-economic level of the metropolitan Skopje region and all other planning regions in the Republic of North Macedonia, as well as to the lower developmental level of all regions in the country, an adequate national policy for balanced regional development entailing all aspects of sustainability is necessary. Despite an attempt of a legislative mimicking of the European Union's Cohesion Policy, the Macedonian regional policy is highly ineffective. Therefore, the application of comparative EU knowledge as a means of improving domestic policy is of immense significance which is, in fact, the focus of the paper. In this context, Poland's experience is taken as exemplary since the country is a specific representative of the Central and Eastern countries, mostly due to its advantages as a decentralised and studious country, currently immersed in an intensive learning process, with increasing administrative capacity and policy-making mechanisms regarding the implementation of the Cohesion Policy, albeit with persisting challenges concerning stagnant intra and interregional domestic convergence. Through the content analysis of legislature, reports, other literature and secondary empirical data, a conclusion is achieved regarding the ineffectiveness of the Macedonian regional policy, the necessity for future support of the regions lagging behind, and systemic long-term changes in many economic and social domains by implementing the acquired knowledge of the factors and contexts of success of Cohesion Policy, and the mentioned features of Poland's implementation of this regional policy, with an ultimate, Euro-integrative perspective.

Keywords: North Macedonia, Balanced Regional Development, European Union, Cohesion Policy, Poland, Sustainability, Convergence

Introduction

The European Union's Cohesion Policy (CP) is the most eclectic internal policy concerning economic, social, territorial and environmental development and cohesion, through setting both axiological EU paradigms and operative implementation aspects. The policy of Balanced Regional Development (BRD) in the Republic of North Macedonia (RNM) attempts to follow the substance of the CP by introducing reflective legislature and strategic documents. However, the effectiveness of this Macedonian policy is highly deficient and is impacted by the versatility of developmental sectors and adjacent policies. Therefore, utilising gained knowledge from the CP could be performed only by analysing comparative aspects that are closely applicable in a domestic, Macedonian context. Due to certain former systemic and evolutive similarities with the Central and Eastern European countries (CEEc), as well as to the specificity of Poland both as a leader among CEEc in certain implementation aspects of the CP and as a country that still faces significant challenges in achieving balanced regional development, this paper aims to abstract the main functional lessons from the Polish regional-policy experience. This would be done through an analysis of the respective literature, strategic-and-legal national and EU documents, reports, and secondary empirical data. So, after the core assessment of the Macedonian BRD, the CP's features, effects, and implementation aspects will be elaborated upon, with a special overview of the CEE countries and with focus on Poland's achievements and deficiencies of regional policy making and implementation.

The Main Features of the Policy of Balanced Regional Development in the Republic of North Macedonia

The policy of regional development in the RNM is necessary for two reasons; many regions are lagging behind in respect of the contemporary social living standards, and there are great disparities between the socio-economic level of the Skopje Region and all other planning regions in the state [(which are not units of local government, but exist only at a NUTS-3 (Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics)] level. This policy represents a solid, normative, systemic entity, with institutional and organisational fundaments, highly suitable to the European CP. Even the definition for the BRD's goal itself is almost identical to the European narrative, and that goal is the "balanced and sustainable development of the entire territory of the Republic of Macedonia, featuring a high rate of economic growth, competitive planning regions with relatively small disparities and optimal usage of natural, human and energy resources,

high economic and social cohesion, and the population enjoying a good living standard" (*Strategy for Regional Development*, 2009). This is only on a declarative level, but the practical experience in the carrying out of this policy is, in reality, somewhat different, as shown in the elaboration below.

Effectiveness-wise, this policy manifests significant non-functionality for a number of reasons. Traditionally, the small allocation for this policy cannot elevate the level of regional competitiveness or reduce regional disparities. The imperative norm envisages an annual allocation of a minimum 1% of GDP (*Law on BRD*, 2007, Art. 27) while the actual spending for the period where precise data is available from 2009–2011 is between 0.003 and 0.2% of BDP annually (Audit Office, 2013). There are strong indications for which official quantitative data does not exist, that in the following years after 2011 until today, the situation has not been changed, i.e., that the maximum spending hasn't reached more than 10% of the stipulated 1% of GDP.[1]

This policy in Macedonia is characterised by centralisation, because it is prevailingly conducted by the Government of RNM and the Council for Regional Development (comprising several ministers). Furthermore, there is inconsistency in the measures, and partial use or application of, IPA funds. Besides the fact the Strategy for Balanced Regional Development 2021–2031 entails partial aspects of BRD, RNM does not have a general strategy for economic development which would be the basis for properly planning the policy of BRD as a coherent whole.

Additionally, the institutional capacity, i.e., the level of expertise of the professional personnel and their personal motivation are relatively low (Zabijakin, Chatleska, 2018). The institutional and administrative inefficiency and partisan structure negatively impacts this policy as well. These aspects of ineffectiveness stem from key factors impacting the policy of BRD in RNM, most of which are systemic, including the immature political level of the state, the limited total financial capacity of RNM, the underdeveloped economic sectors, the low level of strategic planning and policy making, along with deficiencies in educational and administrative policies and good governance.

The crucial factor in failing to achieve this policy's goals derives from the objective financial limits of a medium-developed country, but RNM faces a further reduction of the funds that could be allocated for BRD purposes, because of political or partisan goals, corruption, clientelism

[1] The calculations were made by the author based on unofficial data from separate institutions, and the entire section concerning the effectiveness of the Macedonian regional policy is a subject of the author's previous research.

etc. Additionally, the previously-mentioned realised spending for BRD – which amounts to several millions EUR annually – accounts for all types of territorial units: the regions, areas with specific needs, and rural areas. Given the needs in every area, that of social, health, educational, ecological, gender equality, etc. where billions are required, this relatively small amount isn't enough to affect even minimal change. In addition, the disparities among regions cannot be overcome, because the differences in the allocation of state finances, for instance in two regions, amount to 100,000–150,000 EUR in favour of the poorer region, while, apart from the Skopje region, all other regions participate in the total national GDP with approximately 1 billion EUR annually. These confinements make this policy useless. A negative feature that also and especially harms rural places is the non-existing, previously-envisaged ratio and rules for the distribution of finances according to populated places or areas with specific needs which promotes arbitrary financial distribution (Micevski, 2017, p. 44). Public institutional and financial incapacity negatively influences the ability of the subjects, especially the municipalities (many of which are poor), to apply for IPA projects. Additionally, the obligation of said municipalities to participate with 50% of the financing of the costs of the regional development centres is a special burden that also creates resistance in complying with such obligations.

Future Possibilities

To the end of promoting the concept and realisation of the Macedonian BRD, introducing numerous principles and practices is necessary, but some of the most essential will be stated momentarily. Primarily, an improved economic basis is needed as well as solid, strategic planning involving the entire expert public dealing with BRD and sustainable-development issues. A national strategy for sustainable development is necessary to be adopted which would entail a heretofore lacking strategy for economic development, as well as a strategy for regional development more adequate to the stance, potential, and developmental needs of the regions and the state.

As far as allocations are concerned, the compulsory 1% of the GDP should, at least, be achieved, followed by an increase of the allocation and also by institutionally-ensured actual spending. Then, schemes of fiscal equalisation are needed, with criteria and permanent financing of the poorer parts of the regions, i.e., rural areas, and the ones with specific needs which should be covered by state funds, with the exception of the City of Skopje. Still, the salient dealing with the problems of BRD is by far

not exclusively within the scope of this policy, but relates to many other policies and the elevation of the entire national level of development, in which sense the conceptual, financial, and institutional influence of EU would possibly represent a crucially positive factor.

The Significance and Effectiveness of the EU's Cohesion Policy

Due to North Macedonia's candidate status and the Macedonian accession process to the EU,[2] as well as to geographic proximity, the European regional policy is the primary reference point when the improvement of domestic, policy-making capacities is concerned.

The EU's Cohesion Policy, which aims at economic, territorial, and social cohesion, is the greatest EU investment instrument, thus playing a significant role in overall EU functioning.

The fundaments of the CP are solid – the normative and institutional framework are well-designed and adequate, and the financing is sufficient enough to provide a high level of functionality of this policy. However, the CP faces certain challenges, starting with one at the EU level, represented through the difficulties during Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) negotiation with intergovernmental elements. Then, an important challenge of each programming period is to set the priority investment areas of European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) and to evaluate the effectiveness of such financing. This prioritising includes not only determining allocation ratios to adequate objectives, but also axiological aspects – whether the competitiveness or the social dimension of European functioning should prevail. Another challenge is how to support EU regions that are lagging behind despite abundant financing throughout the previous programming periods. Additionally, despite the declarative EU aspiration for a simplifying of the policy, burdening and complicated procedures both in the decision making process and the implementation of the policy as regards the most basic subjects are a constant issue to be dealt with. However, most of the problematic points of the effectiveness of the CP are detected at the level of national implementation of the policy, depending on each country's political maturity and capacity.

When assessing the impact of the CP, the undertaken studies have not been in unison on a number of aspects, mostly those of the methodological and conceptual. Moreover, the impact of the CP varies across geographic, economic, and sectorial contexts, therefore, scholarly interest has shifted from an assessment of the overall effectiveness of the policy to an

[2] Largely based on the SAA signed in 2001 and entered into force in 2004.

accentuating of the factors that determine in which circumstances the CP produces the greatest impact. However, most of the studies have established some significant, positive effects of the CP, predominantly in terms of regional convergence (Casula, 2020; Fratesi, Wishlade, 2017), regional competitiveness (Dotti, 2016), regional growth (Bachtroegler et al., 2019; Bachtler et al., 2017), innovation, transport infrastructure, economic growth, and employment (Crescenzi, Giua, 2019, p. 5). Counterfactual analyses differently assess the added value of the CP on EU, national, and regional levels, so, merely illustratively, the EC has evaluated that the added value of the CP contributes to the increase of GDP from 0.1% to 8% in certain regions (European Commision, 2017, p. 187). Then, improved policy planning and designing is determined, both of the CP and of national and subnational policies. The CP has also had positive effects in terms of improved policy planning mechanisms (Dotti, 2016, p. 2), along with positively changing the culture and mentality regarding the usage of and accountability for the funds. Additionally, the CP played a mitigative role regarding the last economic crisis in CEE countries (Musiałkowska et al., 2020, p. 120), while today, in what we hope to be post-COVID times, it plays a significant role due to its concepts of green recovery and just transition whose implementations are yet to be evaluated.

To elaborate, even though the COVID crisis has had an asymmetric impact on EU regions (as anticipated), still, certain estimates show the expectation that in less developed regions by 2023, due to cohesive spending in the period of 2014–2020, the GDP would be 2.6% higher than it would have been without such investments (European Commision, 2022a, p. xviii).

Generally, cohesive spending is significant in many areas, and has the potential to increase regional growth, the levels of employment, infrastructure, environmental protection, and to positively impact overall sustainability. Therefore, it is necessary that it persists as a policy, by especially supporting the disadvantaged and declining regions of the EU.

The Necessity of Comparative Context in Macedonian Policy Making

Analysing countries with different features is important in order to determine in which political, economic, and administrative contexts the CP better functions. Since the substance of the Macedonian and EU's regional polices has been elaborated upon, the most adequate approach would be to gauge the implementation and impact of the CP focused on the Central and Eastern European countries. Namely, within the Macedonian context, knowledge transfer from the CEEc is significant

both because of the great social and political analogy that can be made and because these countries have been a part of the EU system for a significant amount of time. The main parameters of an analogy with the CEEc are: the maturity of democracy, the level of decentralisation, features of good governance (i.e., the lack of it), the similar period in which the disparities among regions were emphasised – the 1990s, the great gaps of the centre-periphery (especially between large agglomerations and remote rural areas) and the feature that most of the small communities are not capable of performing their economic and social functions well in their areas. In this context, retrieving knowledge from Poland's experience, and gauging the advantages and disadvantages of Poland's domestic conducting of regional policy would shed an invaluable light on Macedonian policy making.

The Effectiveness of the Cohesion Policy in Central and Eastern European Countries

The CEEc (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia) constitute 24% of EU territory, 21% of its population, but only 7% of the EU's GDP. In these countries, the internal disparities were emphasised in the 1990s as a result of a lack of regional policies and institutions, the depopulation of rural areas, and overly accentuated capitals which implied a great necessity to introduce regional policy. The CP instigated the institutionalisation of regional policies in these countries (Musiałkowska et al., 2020, pp. 1–2). Today, each EU Member State develops a different model of regional policy – the CEEc concentrate on having an overall state performance by focusing economic activity in their greater urban centres, while insufficiently considering the development of rural areas (Crescenzi et al., 2017, p. 4). These CEEc models do not always coincide with the EU's concept of balanced, regional development and territorial cohesion, so such mismatches ultimately negatively affect the realisation of CP goals.

Unlike for the rich EU countries (namely; Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands), net contributors to the EU budget which compose almost half of the EU GDP and where the cohesive financing is negligible compared to their national GDPs, the CP is of a great importance for the CEEc which are more dependent on external financial resources (Piattoni, Polverari, 2016, pp. 298–306). In the CEEc, around 50% of the Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) are allocated (Musiałkowska, 2020, p. 2) and represent large shares of domestic public investments. Compared to the other Member States, Poland has the

highest aggregate amounts of ESIF allocated in each programming period, including the current one (European Commision, 2022b; European Commision, 2019). Most regions in Poland are constantly eligible for substantial CP funding, and the greatest returns of the policy are both noted and expected in those Polish regions that are cohesive beneficiaries (European Commision, 2017, p. 187). In fact, the impact of the CP for the period 2014-2020 is estimated to increase the GDP in Poland by 3.4% by the end of the implementation period (2023) above what it would have been in the absence of cohesion policy investment. The impact is also large in Slovakia (+3%) and Romania (+2.9%). Until 2030, the increase of GDP would be the largest in Croatia and Poland (more than 4%) (European Commision, 2017, p. 187).

However, this GDP growth mostly refers to the regions with specific territorial conditions pertaining to the labour market and human capital in innovations and ICT (Bachtler et al., 2017, p. 267) while the regional gap within these countries has not shrunk due to the low competitiveness and incapacity for innovation and poor public support for lagging regions, especially rural regions (Piattoni, Polverari, 2016, p. 317). Moreover, due to administrative and political factors, the urban/rural division remains a main feature of the CEEc where the majority of the smaller towns are unable to perform certain welfare and economic functions, accompanied by social differentiation and poverty concentrated in backward and peripheral rural areas. The relatively rapid economic development in the CEEc was concentrated in the capital cities and their immediate surroundings (Piattoni, Polverari, 2016, p. 307). On the other hand, the eastern and western cities and richer regions as well as the eastern and western countries, as entities, have converged over the years.

The main investments in the CEEc have been in infrastructure (social infrastructure, transport, energy, and telecommunications), but over the course of time and due to the satisfying of such needs, the investments for infrastructure, environment, and human capital have been reduced, while those concerning business support, technical assistance and research, along with development and innovation have increased (Piattoni, Polverari, 2016, p. 313).

Despite the presented mosaic accomplishments of the CP in CEEc, specific difficulties for a successful realisation of the regional policies in these countries largely revolve around the implementation of the CP at the domestic level (national, and subnational). These impediments are due to structural issues which entail clientelism, political deterrence, rent seeking, and elite captures, especially at the local level. Furthermore, weak institutions, smaller innovation capacities, a lack of human capital

(Musiałkowska et al., 2020, p. 166), a lack of experts, loose regulative, the exclusion of social partners, and intensive political meddling represent significant difficulties as well (Piattoni, Polverari, 2016, p. 316). In fact, all these features are inherent of emerging institutional systems.

Specific Assertions of Polish Regional Development

Despite being the biggest and most constant beneficiary of the CP, Poland marks stable regional differences. Even though various social, economic, and environmental indicators are taken into consideration when measuring Poland's achieving of strategic EU and UN sustainability goals, it remains that the GDP of its regions and the country is the prevailing criterion when determining the convergence of EU regions and countries. In this sense, a progressive, regional convergence of development on a European scale has been accomplished at the cost of intraregional differences at the local level (Komorowski, 2021, p. 2). In Poland, after its accession to the EU, the importance of the regional policy increased, rather focusing on urban areas than on rural ones (Dudek, Wrzochalska, 2019, p. 304) but the prognosticated spatial spillovers to other proximate areas did not meet expectations (Komorowski, 2021, p. 12). In addition, Bachtler et al. consider that the simple allocation of finances does not mean growth. For Poland, the investments for 2007–2013 flowing directly into the Polish economy can be estimated around 2.5% of the GDP, but investing in large array instead of pro-development projects does not make a lasting input to the growth of the Polish economy (Bachtler et al., 2017, pp. 39–40). However, more recent research and data, such as the aforementioned Commission's stance regarding the expected returns on the Polish cohesive regions, the reporting on the fulfilment of the EU's Europe 2020 agenda, including smart development objectives, innovation, and productive environment and the accomplishments of the much broader sustainable development goals, suggest a significant developmental advancing of Poland.

Namely, primary attempts to catch up with the more developed EU countries were made by Poland through public infrastructure investments, expenditures directed at improvement of the quality of the education and health care systems, the qualifications and skills of labour resources, and entrepreneurship and innovation (Dudek, Wrzochalska, 2019, p. 300). Just illustratively, the Technological Credit has shifted firms' investment patterns; it has accelerated the acquisition of new equipment, technology, and improved efficiency, work organisation, and skills. (Florio et al., 2018, p. 2154). Lately, out of several CEE countries that rank way above average in following the Smart Growth priority, and with average Sustainable Growth

and Inclusive Growth results, Poland has taken the lead – it is ranked 5th, with Slovakia 6th, Czechia 12th, and Hungary 15th (Peshivchak, 2020, p. 64).

Additionally, the Polish citizens' voice of confidence is indicative of the realisation of the CP in Poland. Namely, when asked about the usage of EU funds, 70% of respondents think that Poland uses the EU funds correctly, and 87% of respondents think that many positive changes could occur in Poland thanks to EU funds. Also, 71% think that, due to funding from the EU, positive changes can be noticed at the local level (Opilowska, 2019, p. 18).

The new Polish regional development policy concentrates on providing necessary stimulation to small-and-medium-sized towns, along with remote and rural areas in order to distribute economic incentives more evenly across the territory (e.g., cooperation between local governments, the activation of socially and economically marginalised areas, the development of transport and communications, and the implementation of social and technological innovations). Given that this changing of the development model is a long process, the effects might not be statistically visible for some years (Komorowski, 2021, pp. 12–13).

Areas of Poland's Advantages Compared to the Rest of the CEEc

Decentralisation

Decentralised structures realise CP implementation more effectively if all other state paradigms are well established.

In the CEEc, the central governments traditionally dominate the processes. Despite several attempts at reforms, most attempts have been delayed or dismissed, except in Poland, and have not led to the creation of stronger, larger elected regions (Piattoni, Polverari, 2016, p. 316). The CEEc prefer special measures for a more flexible management of the cohesive programmes. On the opposite ends of centralised functioning in the CEEc are Hungary and Poland. Hungary is highly centralised, both administratively and politically, while Poland has a decentralised system of regional governments – so-called *województwa* (voivodeship) with significant competences, along with the *powiaty* (municipalities) and *gminy* (communes) (Bachtler et al., 2017, p. 220). This kind of decentralisation is also due to the size of the country and on which level the CP is being implemented (Pleshivchak, 2020, p. 64). So, Poland is a regionalised, unitary state where elected regional governments have some limited budgetary and fiscal autonomy, but substantial competences still rest at

the state level and there is still strong dependence on financial transfers from the central government (Ferry, 2021, p. 44). Additionally, both Hungary's and Poland's political loyalty towards the central government has been positively associated with the per capita amount of funds spent at both the local and the regional levels (Bachtler et al., 2017, p. 221).

For many regions in CEEc, the bottom-up processes concerning the CP are challenging, except for Poland, which has increased its capacities in this sense over time. Poland is given as an example alongside Germany for its functional decentralisation, positively affecting CP implementation and effectiveness. Moreover, during the 2014–2020 period, these two countries reported an increasing financial share and a greater importance of regional operational programmes regarding the use of the European Regional Development Fund and European Social Fund (Szlachta, Zaleski, 2017, p. 36).

The necessity of cooperative functioning of all government tiers in Poland is recognised in its strategic documents. Poland's new 'National Strategy for Regional Development' includes a strong contractual element to address vertical coordination, ensuring that national-level policy decisions take regional priorities into account and to detail the policy instruments to be jointly financed and implemented between the centre and the region. (Ferry, 2021, pp. 47–48).

The Absorption of Cohesive Funding and Administrative Capacity

Myriad factors impact the effectiveness of the CP. Among them, administrative capacity is one of the most important, concerning both the national and sub-national levels. Low governing capacities diminish the impact of public investments, including the cohesive investments (European Commision, 2017, p. xxi) and can lead to losses in financing for both. The managing of structural funds in the CEEc is insufficiently efficient while the absorption is constantly suboptimal. Throughout the monitoring of the accession process of the CEEc, the EC repeatedly stated in many reports that the newly-established institutions in these countries were only formally functioning and that they had insufficient administrative capacity. Poland was the only exception (Piattoni, Polverari, 2016, p. 309).

Among the CEEc, Bulgaria and Romania are the most problematic countries, with an absorption rate of ESIF that barely surpasses 50% (Bachtler et al., 2017, p. 242) and where the difficulties were determined regarding understanding the role of the Managing Authorities, how to spend the funds, find co-finances, and how to train personnel and beneficiaries (European Commision, 2014, pp. 175–156).

At the beginning of Poland's membership, this formal adherence to the CP's organisational and legal paradigms has been marked. However, over time, Poland has increased the level of substantial implementation of the policy, due to its overall greater preparedness and level of state and economic development as well as its capacity for policy making. As a specific issue, it is considered that the partnership principle is better exercised in Poland. This principle is today embedded in the very beginning of the 'Polish Strategy of Regional Development 2030', stating that "regional policy is a coordinated action of public bodies (the central government and local governments) and socio-economic partners for the development of the different regions" (MDFRP, 2020, p. 3).

Polish regions are slightly ahead of their EU counterparts in terms of their gaining knowledge about regional processes and introducing of consistent systems. However, systemic management of such information is still lacking (Bachtler et al., 2017, p. 303).

Additionally, the effects of this Polish advantage in an administrative capacity and subsequent absorption rate have still not been experienced properly, since the gap between large cities and rural areas has not been reduced, which implies other prioritising issues impacting this imbalance. Nearly 40% of CP funds for Poland had been allocated to rural areas, inhabited by 40% of the country's population but with disregarded spatial distribution; the highest absorption is reported in over a third of *gminy* (communes) with a high level of development but in less than a fifth of communes with a low level of development. Communes with higher levels of absorption have a more favourable local-budgetary situation and a high degree of deagrarianisation of their local economies. (Komorowski et al., 2021, p. 1). In the period of 2007–2015, the CP's implementation was preferential to cities – the average value of money from the EU funds per inhabitant in rural areas amounted to about EUR 1,200, while in urban regions it was EUR 1,700, and in intermediate regions EUR 1,500. (Dudek, Wrzochalska, 2019, p. 308).

It is evident that, despite Poland's advantages and upward trends in practicing good governing, and its usage of CP policy-making knowledge and improvement of implementation practices, it remains that a more attentive approach is needed; one which is compliant to the goals and substance of the CP, especially regarding disadvantaged and rural areas.

The Urban Dimension

The first urban mainstreaming was introduced in the 2007–2013 period through cohesive funds, when several joint financial initiatives were introduced, the most important one being JESSICA (Cottella, 2018,

p. 11). The JESSICA initiative is a financial instrument focused on the sustainable development of cities including a variety of targets, with an accentuated efficiency of grants and long-term viability of its projects.

Poland was the first country to sign the agreement, and five Polish regions included JESSICA resources into their operational programmes (Musiałkowska et al., 2020, p. 5). Even though this initiative has been criticised as being suboptimally used and additionally criticised for its urban mainstreaming not reaching expected results (Cottella, 2018, p. 11), for Poland, it turned out to be a relative success, since 109 out of 161 projects (67.70%) were revenue-generating projects (Musiałkowska et al., 2020, pp. 177–178).

Conclusions

The Macedonian policy of Balanced Regional Development is legally and declaratively stipulated almost identically to the EU's CP. However, it is highly ineffective due not only to financial insufficiency and deficient rules for the fair distribution of funds, but to its unsynchronised approach with other national policy endeavours, institutional incapacities etc., stemming from structural economic and political deficiencies, the limited overall financial capacity of the Republic of North Macedonia, its underdeveloped economic sectors and even lower level of strategic planning and policy making, as well as deficiencies in education, administrative policies, and good governance. The future development of this policy should be based on a strategic, sustainable conceptualisation of several domestic policies, improved economic sectors, a permanent financing of disadvantaged areas, and schemes of fiscal equalisation in their favour.

More substantial possibilities for the development of the Macedonian BRD policy could be determined in the context of the EU, due to financial opportunities, the introducing of principles, values, and overall policy design, since the CP has produced significant, positive effects in terms of economic growth, convergence, employment, infrastructure, sustainability, and policy-making capacity building, especially for the less developed EU countries which are more dependent on EU public investments. Therefore, to the end of promoting the realisation of this Macedonian policy, the application of substantial, comparative knowledge is necessary, particularly based on the CP's experience of countries with analogous features, such as the CEEc, out of which Poland is the stand-out due to its being the group's success story, but also because of the challenges it still faces.

Namely, Poland has significantly improved the implementation of the CP, its acquisition of knowledge, policy-making, its exercising of the

partnership principle, the sustainable urban dimension, smart growth and usage of funds due to the advancement of its administrative capacity, real three-tier decentralisation, and its overall educational, social, and economic capacities. However, the domestic regional disparities have persisted as have the ones between intensively productive agglomerations and remote or disadvantaged areas and rural regions. This implies the necessity for Poland to follow the convergence objective of the CP along with the knowledge regarding the factors and contexts of CP effectiveness more closely by using more sophisticated indicators, not just GDP regarding sustainable development entailing many sectorial domains, accompanied with greater support for lagging areas. A detailed insight of these Polish and EU aspects along with further respective comparative research would be immensely beneficial for the elevation of the Macedonian regional policy which would be a long and complex process.

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Poland remains the unquestionable spokesperson and advocate of the further enlargement of the European Union, presenting its own experience as an example proving the expediency of opening a membership prospect for the Western Balkans. This publication contributes to the implementation of Poland's foreign policy goals in the context of effectively shaping the image of Poland as a country open to economic and business cooperation, and as a leader in political and economic transformation, sharing its experiences with other countries. This book covers articles written by Polish and Balkan authors. Polish experts have focused on the presentation of experiences resulting from the economic, social, and political transformation carried out in Poland after 1989, with particular emphasis on the accession process and subsequent membership in the European Union and NATO. The authors from the Balkan states, in turn, have highlighted in their articles the greatest problems and challenges in the process of transformation and reforms conducted in their countries over the past three decades.

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