



## RETHINKING THE ROLE OF VISEGRAD GROUP IN THE EU ENLARGEMENT PROCESS

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### *Abstrak*

*Munculnya otoritarianisme dan skeptisisme Uni Eropa (UE) di Eropa Tengah telah menimbulkan kekhawatiran tentang proyek Integrasi UE. Gerakan populis di negara-negara Grup Visegrad, terdiri dari empat negara Eropa Tengah, dianggap sebagai ancaman terhadap proyek Integrasi dan proses perluasan UE. Makalah ini mencoba untuk meninjau kembali peran Grup Visegrad dalam kebijakan dan proses integrasi UE menggunakan studi kasus tentang peran kerja sama V4 dengan enam Negara Balkan Barat (WB6) melalui lensa sosio-konstruktivisme. Tulisan ini menemukan potensi sosio-konstruktivisme dalam menjelaskan aspek norma, nilai, dan identitas, bukan hanya kepentingan material. Selain itu, negara-negara V4 juga mendukung WB6 dengan berbagi pengalaman dan menjadi contoh sub-regionalisme sebagai sarana keanggotaan UE. Pada akhirnya, tulisan ini mencoba memetakan karakteristik, prospek, dan hambatan peran V4 dalam mendukung jalan WB6 menuju keanggotaan UE.*

**Kata Kunci:** *Balkan Bara; Eropa Tengah; Grup Visegrad; kebijakan perluasan; Uni Eropa*

### **Abstract**

The rise of authoritarianism and European Union (EU) skepticism in Central Europe has raised concern about the EU Integration project. Populist movements in Visegrad Group countries, consisting of four Central European states, have been deemed threats to the Integration project and the EU enlargement process. This paper attempts to revisit and rethink the role of the Visegrad Group in EU integration policy and process using a case study of the role of V4 cooperation with six Western Balkan Countries (WB6) through the socio-constructivist lens. This paper finds the potential of socio-constructivism in explaining the aspect of norms, values, and identities, not just material interests. Moreover, the V4 countries also support WB6 as an example of sub-regionalism as a means to EU membership. In the end, this paper attempts to map out the characteristics, prospects, and impediments of V4's role in supporting the WB6's path to the EU.

**Keywords:** Central Europe; enlargement policy; European Union; Visegrad Group; Western Balkan

## Introduction

The rise of authoritarianism and, to some extent, EU-reject leaders in Central Europe have raised concern about the European Union (EU) Integration project. The Visegrad group is a framework between four Central European states established in 1991 to promote democracy in their political institutions and support the member states' accession into the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and EU. It is infamous owing to its similar position in EU's policies. These policies include the EU's migration policies, democratic deconsolidation threat—especially the rule of law in Hungary and Poland—rejection of Brussel's rule, human rights conditions, and the rise of populism and authoritarianism. It is not a coincidence that the members of the bloc—Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, and Slovakia—are among the youngest members of the EU, joining in 2004. Long before the integration of Visegrad countries, there has been a concern of contradiction between the widening and deepening of European integration among scholars (Stehn, 1997). However, many scholars have recently pointed out that the EU is generally lukewarm towards the accession of new countries due to illiberal trends and anti-EU politics in the Visegrad group (Lorenz & Anders, 2021; Sedelmeier, 2014).

Due to this trend, the Visegrad bloc is said to be harming EU values and putting the EU at risk of disintegration (Morillas, 2017). Kazharski (2018), in his article "*The End of Central Europe...*" argued that the rise of right-wing parties as an effect of the migration crisis has shaped a normative project juxtaposed to western Europe's liberal values. As a distinct type from Euroscepticism, Heinisch (2017) conceptualizes this as Europragmatism—a different type from Euroscepticism that is apparent as the party is still benefiting from EU integration yet rejecting EU rules and values on specific issues at the same time. Historically, the Visegrad bloc is used as a negotiating vehicle for the four countries to join the EU. However, after the accession, the bloc has played a significant role in the European Union, specifically in this paper on its contribution to shaping the EU enlargement policies. This paper questions how and in what way Visegrad countries are supporting and contributing to the European enlargement project.

When we discuss the actorness of Visegrad countries, the first group of scholars sees Visegrad sub-regionalism mainly as a path to EU integration. This group of scholars believes that the role of the Visegrad group is pragmatic, *ad hoc*, and merely a

vehicle for EU integration (Kazkharski, 2020). The completion of the accession negotiation in 2002 raised concern about the future of the Visegrad group (Dangerfield, 2009). The second group of scholars, such as Morillas (2017), focuses on the (dis)-functioning of the Visegrad bloc within the EU liberal democracy framework. These theories are too pessimistic and are not adequate to explain why the Visegrad group has been vocal in shaping the EU enlargement policy, particularly in the Western Balkan area. This paper tends to lean toward the third group of scholars, which are more optimistic and recognize the distinct characteristics of the Visegrad group cooperation and its shared values with the EU. This paper believes that the Visegrad group also contributes to shaping EU policies, not just the other way around.

This paper offers a more optimistic conceptualization of the agency of the Visegrad bloc while simultaneously rejecting simplistic and reductionist views of the Visegrad bloc, such as merely "pragmatic" as it puts the region in a peripheral position in the European Union. Even so, this paper does not deny the challenges and complexities of the Visegrad-EU interaction. Instead, this paper argues that the Visegrad group has significantly shaped the EU agenda. Hence, its role is beyond merely just a vehicle for EU integration or just a regional cooperation platform. Most scholars see the efforts of Visegrad countries in the advocacy of integrating Western Balkan in either a realist balance of power to prevent them from Russia, Chinese, or Turkish influence (Cela *et al.*, 2020; Feyerabend *et al.*, 2018) or in liberal perspective for economic and security interest (Ciderova & Kovacevic, 2015; Nič *et al.*, 2012). The research objective is to conceptualize the Visegrad Group's role in shaping the EU policy debate and process by making visible the normative dimension in the Visegrad group's external policy in advocating for the enlargement to Western Balkan, moving beyond the traditionally simplified conceptualization of the power of the bloc.

Through the lens of socio-constructivism, this paper argues that Visegrad's actions could be better explained by understanding the socio-constructivist dimensions, primarily through the promotion of EU norms and values and by being an example through experience-sharing and institution-remodeling. We find this normative approach taken by the Visegrad Group is due to the shared identity between Western Balkan and Visegrad groups, an attempt to embrace EU values and boost its image, as well as solidarity, geographical, and historical proximity. A minimal body of work

highlighted the role of the Visegrad group using socio-constructivist theory. One scholar, Griessler (2018), focused on how Visegrad countries perceive themselves as part of the EU identity. Material interests are indeed essential, but they are shaped by a broader system of norms, values, and identities. Instead, the EU's approach through the Commission has been even more materialistic than the Visegrad group. The narrative of "strategic" or "geopolitical interest" of the Western Balkan (WB) to the EU is introduced to keep the debate alive, while the Visegrad group increasingly views the Western Balkan from the lense of solidarity, norms, EU values, and logic of appropriateness (Çela *et.al.*, 2020).

In order to demonstrate the argument, this paper will center the discussion on European External Action Service (EEAS) policy, precisely the EU's enlargement policy of Western Balkan Six (WB6) as a study case. This case study represents the Visegrad group's contribution to the EU integration process. Visegrad Group is chosen due to the integration of Western Balkan to the EU remains to be and increasingly becomes V4's/V4's main priority, especially during Hungarian Presidency (2021-2022) (MoFa and Trade Hungary, 2021). This article is going to use qualitative data from secondary sources such as journal articles, book chapters, and official reports. This research uses an interpretivist approach to interpret what role, especially the normative dimension, and the reasons behind Visegrad's policies towards Western Balkan. The WB6 refers to six remaining countries in the Balkan that remain outside of Europe, in which there are four candidate countries—Montenegro, Albania, Serbia, and North Macedonia—as well as two potential candidates—Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo.

This case is interesting because the Visegrad group has not only promoted enlargement perspectives for these countries by shaping the EU enlargement debate and contributing to the Visegrad Group enlargement process in general, but it has also been, to some extent role model and has been sharing practices to increase sub-regionalism as a pathway to integration to the EU. This article will outline the discussion as three parts: first, the position and role of Visegrad group in the EU, especially in the widening-deepening dilemma; second, the efforts by Visegrad group to the enlargement of WB6 to highlight its normative dimension; third, the characteristics of Visegrad as a model

subregional cooperation to the WB6, and finally prospects and challenges followed by conclusion and recommendation.

### ***Positioning Visegrad in the EU's Widening vs Deepening Dilemma***

The EU enlargement capacity is often addressed to the rising Euroscepticism and the reluctance to the Union's role, such as in the Visegrad Group. After the expansion from 15 to 27 member states in 2004, the EU has been facing many crises that can potentially drain the economy and destabilize the politics within the region, for example, the 2008 financial crisis, the 2010-2012 eurozone crisis, the 2015 migrant crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the authoritarian turn in all four V4 countries has also contributed to the rise of Eurosceptic parties, threatening the European integration process. Regarding the status quo, it is vital to understand the characteristics of European integration, the characteristics of the Visegrad Group and its member states, and the group's position in the Union.

The increasing illiberal practice inside the Visegrad countries, contradicting the group's initial goal from its formation, raises concern about 'deepening' rather than 'widening' the EU integration process. The EU is the result of an integration process consisting of 'widening' and 'deepening.' The former refers to the addition of more groups and member states to the Union. At the same time, the latter indicates the greater integration of domains of competence within the Union, requiring policy and institutional elements among its member states in economic, social, and political integration (Berglof *et al.*, 2008). The EU has tried to do both processes, with an expansion from 6 members to 27 members as the 'widening' process and a transition from an economic community to an organization that includes social and political discussions as the 'deepening' process. However, as ties get more profound among the EU member states, it becomes much more difficult for other European states to join the Union. This is because the diverse membership produces different demands, and there should be a balance in the Union between responding to these demands and keeping the efficiency and effectiveness of the group.

The depiction of the Visegrad Group countries as authoritarian states can be perceived as simplistic and reductionist, considering their unique geopolitical situation that contributes to their political culture. As they are situated between Western and

Eastern Europe, the four member states are located between the West which operates a separation of power in their politics and the East which utilizes a fusion of power (Hornat, 2021: 83). While democracy promotion in these countries has a clear geopolitical rationale, this is required to be analyzed via the lens of epistemic communities. As the post-Cold War world was transitioning to democracy, each Visegrad country developed a working definition on democracy—i.e., a means to promote economic and social rights through dialogue in the Czech Republic, a prerequisite to global peace and national security in Hungary, a precondition to stable partnerships with neighboring states according to Poland, as well as a way to sustain multilateralism according to Slovakia (Hornat, 2021; 78-80). Despite the difference in working definitions, the Visegrad has developed into a partnership with the primary aim to promote democracy, both among its member states and their neighbours, by sharing their best practices with state institutions and civil society organisations as means of social modernisation. In other words, the Visegrad Group has become a platform for its member states to provide democratic transition assistance to its neighbouring states—including the WB6 member states.

Sugito (2021) argued that the politicization of migration issues does not necessarily represent direct aims to reject the EU's integration process but more of a process of an inward policy done by politicians to secure power in the domestic context. Instead, after the end of the Cold War, the countries were committed to developing democratic political systems, and such commitment was solidified after they acceded to the EU in 2004. However, the V4 countries, regarded as anchors to Europeanisation and democratic change in the broader East-Central European region, have experienced a populist surge—for example, Law and Justice Party (PiS) in Poland and Fidesz in Hungary (Morillas & Hepford, 2017). This populist surge may have created normative differences between the V4 and the other EU member states, but this surge should not be a hindrance to V4's disassociation from the former Eastern bloc. The group is accepting the norms of the West—for instance, democracy, freedom, human rights, and the right to prosperity—and implementing such norms through their foreign policy (Griessler, 2018). Additionally, the group also helps shaping the agenda of the EU. This was visible during the 2018/2019 Hungarian presidency in the Visegrad when V4 countries advocated for stronger EU border defense against irregular migration in 2018,



and this agenda gained support from other EU member states owing to the strong coordination and their strategic preparation before the EU negotiations (Garai, 2018). In other words, notwithstanding the populist surge and the relatively young democracies in its membership, the V4 actively shapes agendas of the EU.

The Visegrad Group's role is not only limited to reforming existing norms and practices but also includes the EU's economic development sectors. The 2021/2022 V4 presidency of Hungary has stated that "it is the shared goal of the Visegrad countries to be among those who benefit from the global economic and political changes", and this statement implies the potential of the Visegrad countries to be agents of change—both inside and beyond the Union (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary, 2021 in Březovská & Karásková, 2021). Accession to the EU helped the Visegrad countries follow a path of trade liberalization and economic integration, opening up another path to attract foreign investments. Despite having smaller numbers of GDP and lower numbers of exports compared to Western Europe countries in 2015, the V4 countries have a combined GDP amounting to EUR781.5bn and export values amounting to EUR484.4bn (Gadomski, 2016). These numbers showed 5.3 per cent of the GDP of the Union and 9.9 per cent of the combined exports of all EU member states, indicating fast economic growth. Furthermore, the V4 countries are also transitioning to digital technologies so as to match the EU Industry 4.0 approach—indicated in the high rates of enterprise resource planning and customer relationship management, with Slovakia and Poland reaching more than 20 per cent in both aspects (Szabo, 2020). Hence, the Visegrad's role encompasses many aspects of the Union.

The contribution of Visegrad countries to the EU can be traced to its characteristics. As a subregional organization amidst the European integration effort today, the V4 does not attempt to form another supranational governance. The organization remains a platform for its members to coordinate their policies and cooperate in various areas, such as culture, science, education, and youth exchange. In addition to flexibility, another characteristic of the Visegrad is multilevel cooperation, indicated by regular meetings of governmental and nongovernmental actors, with a clear goal of shaping close contact among member states and with European Union and third world countries (Dangerfield, 2014). These characteristics allow Visegrad to become a

platform for its member states, after successfully joining the European Union, to harmonize their agendas before advocating these agendas to discussions in the Union.

While in the recent development, due to populist governments in their country, Poland and Hungary seem to go through different trajectories of democracy compared to Czechia and Slovakia. However, the presidential agenda from the Hungarian presidency in 2021/2022 to the Slovak presidency in 2022/2023 still highlights the importance of the enlargement process of the EU, mainly to Eastern Europe and Western Balkan, citing Western Balkan enlargement as "*high on the agenda in order to achieve a tangible progress when it comes to enlargement process*" (MoFA Slovak Republic & V4 Future). The agenda also highlighted the principle of "human rights, freedom, democracy, and the rule of law," as stipulated in the Declaration of the Prime Ministers of the V4 countries, celebrating the 30th anniversary of the group in Krakow. Indeed, different countries' stances on issues made Visegrad's a fractured alliance, however, the Visegrad will thrive if they are able to find an agenda they can harmonize on (Zalan, 2022). Thus, domestic political development might affect the V4's policies at home and the EU's intergovernmental level but does not significantly affect the bloc's commitment to advocating for enlargement in the EU.

Regarding the harmonization of agendas and the EU enlargement policy, one of the V4's agenda currently being advocated is the integration of WB6 into the EU. While the V4 has strongly supported European integration and values, the V4 brings attention to an agenda that has been absent from the EU's foreign policy. Looking at the geopolitical condition of the V4 countries between Western Europe and Eastern Europe, the V4 aspires to help the WB6 countries to detach from Soviet-era regional defense and economic alliances via experience-sharing and know-how transfers from V4 to WB6 (Dangerfield, 2014). The institutional structure inside Visegrad—with less formalized consultations, annual rotation of presidencies, and multilevel coordination—has enabled its member states to harmonize agendas. This is different from the EU, which currently holds a defensive stance to reduce irregular migration flows as well as have better protection of EU external borders. By providing assistance to WB6 and advocating for the integration of WB6 into the EU, the V4 attempts to support the EU enlargement policy. In return, the EU should not ignore the widening aspect of its enlargement policy, as this attempt by Visegrad is beneficial to the security of a unified Europe,



especially in the Southern area. Widening and deepening are not processing that run-in reverse, and both should also not be depicted this way. This is the message that V4 is sending via its advocating process. Despite currently facing regression, the enlargement policy remains the most important foreign policy instrument, and the Visegrad is supporting the policy while emphasizing that widening and deepening can happen simultaneously in the case of WB6 in the Europe integration project.

### ***Beyond Materialism: Visegrad Group in Western Balkan's Integration into the EU***

The Visegrad Group has traditionally been voicing the strongest support of EU's enlargement to the southern region, mainly the Western Balkan region. Slovakia's V4 Presidency in 2011 marked the milestone of enlargement support for Western Balkan by V4 countries (Visegrad Group, 2021). Nowadays, Western Balkan enlargement and Eastern partnership remain foreign policy concerns of the V4 countries. In the report document prepared by the V4 Panel of Eminent Personalities (2016), regional cooperation and enlargement of Western Balkan is mentioned as "a strategic imperative" and even "a moral duty". During the EU-Western Balkans Summit, Central European countries represented a strong voice in voicing consistent enlargement prospects for the Western Balkan countries (Government of Poland, 2016). These efforts reaffirm that Western Balkan enlargement is a priority of the Visegrad Group.

The Visegrad Group also has been engaging Western Balkan states in political dialogues. The most recent example is the meeting at Rogalin Palace on 28 June 2021 between foreign ministers—in which they were both discussing acceleration to the EU path and post-pandemic recovery and sharing the experiences of Central Europe in building a robust regional partnership (Government of Poland, 2021). Moreover, the first 'Visegrad Plus (V4+)' meeting was held by inviting ministers of foreign affairs from Visegrad countries as well as Western Balkan. This political involvement has become a regular consultative mechanism (Madhi, 2018). Not only through dialogues, but the Visegrad group also tries to involve the Western Balkan in EU meetings. Currently, the V4 countries and Austria have requested the countries of Western Balkan to be involved in official talks on the Future of the European Union. The Visegrad countries have been drawing the Western Balkan countries into the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE). Moreover, the V4 states have expressed their willingness

through the Joint Statement of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Visegrad Group Countries on the Western Balkans (Březovská & Karásková, 2021). Despite the effort seems to have not been successful, the Visegrad group plays a role as a bridge between the EU and Western Balkan countries or as a friend to advance the enlargement process.

In trade and investment-related areas, in Budapest, the chambers of commerce of Visegrad Group (V4) and Western Balkan Six Chamber Investment Forum (WB6 CIF) have signed a joint declaration to facilitate the trade of companies from both regions with the European Union. The WB6 CIF established the 'Green Corridor' between CEFTA/Western Balkans 6 and EU member states to increase connectivity by supporting trade, transport facilitation, and fast flow of goods (WB6CIF, 2021a). Members of the Visegrad have been active advocates for the implementation of the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans and the Common regional Market Action Plan. For example, all parties prioritize expanding Green Lines to the border crossing points between Hungary and Serbia, reducing waiting time and technical formalities (WB6CIF, 2021b). Besides connectivity, the Visegrad also aims to promote the WB6 common regional market by advancing inter-subregional cooperation in central Europe as a pathway to entering the EU market.

Visegrad countries also allocate substantial amounts of funding through the Visegrad+ Grants to Western Balkan countries for democratization and transformation through mobility programs and transfer of know-how to civil society organizations (Visegrad Fund, n.d. a). The Visegrad+ grants mobility programs or assistance to the Western Balkans Fund a total of more than €3 million (Visegrad Fund, 2020). Workshop and policy recommendations were remodelled after the experience of Visegrad countries and were organized in Visegrad countries. The Western Balkans Fund is aimed to increase civil society relations in the region by promoting cultural and scientific cooperation, youth exchange and mobility, and sustainable development. Thus, material assistance is given on the basis of reform conditionality and adjustment to EU values, not just for material interests.

The V4 countries, especially Poland as the only member, are also supportive of European-led enlargement projects and initiatives for Western Balkan, such as the Berlin Process, which is an initiative to step up regional cooperation in Western Balkan with the end goal of integrating these countries into the European Union. The German-

led initiative focused on regional economic, connectivity, and infrastructure issues. Berlin process has resulted in the creation of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), which is a regional organization fostering youth cooperation, aiming to fight prejudices, with the long-term aim of reconciliation and promotion of EU values (Březovská, R., & Karásková, 2021). Poland in 2019 also hosted an EU-led initiative, the Western Balkans Summit, which discusses connectivity, investment, economic, and security issues among EU and Western Balkan, aiming to close the socioeconomic gap between the two regions. It can be said that many EU initiatives focus on pragmatic issues such as economy, infrastructure, investment, and connectivity and that Visegrad countries are actively involved. A report by the Visegrad Fund and European Movement of Montenegro (2020) highlighted how V4 member countries' assistance in the Berlin Process is mainly concerned with connectivity, transportation infrastructure, energy, and economy. Czech Republic highlights infrastructure, energy, and economic cooperation, Hungary highlights railway and cross-border connectivity, and Poland focuses on financial assistance and security issues.

It is important to note that the cooperation lies in the mutual interest of the two regions, especially material interest in economy, security, and stability as reflected by V4 countries' priorities, such as investment, economy, energy, and infrastructure. The EU, especially V4 countries and the Western Balkans, are interdependent with shared economic and security interests. Economic cooperation will benefit both regions and security issues in Western Balkan. However, the V4 also stresses the need for reform in democracy, the rule of law, and other EU values in the effort to integrate the Western Balkan into the EU. Thus, it is inaccurate to simply put the Visegrad into "Europragmatic" lense only, as it also advocates for adopting European values in Western Balkan. Even compared to the EU's effort, Visegrad Group's activities have added values, for it includes advising Western Balkan countries on political transformation and reforms in democracy and the rule of law, such as the establishment of V4 - Western Balkans Expert Network on the Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights (Juzová, 2019).

The research finally concludes that, similarly to Finnemore's (1996) model of socio-constructivism, the Visegrad group's cooperation with Western Balkan is not just rationalist-materialist driven but also driven by promotion of norms. This can be proven

through the promotion of EU norms, for instance, rule of law, democracy, human rights, and free-market mechanisms through positive conditionality, such as, material incentives, financial aids, and technical assistance towards reform in Western Balkan. Tocci (2007) defines positive conditionality as exchange of benefits emphasizing prerequisites for economic cooperation. Hence, we find the cooperation mechanism between Visegrad and Western Balkan is more beneficial to be explained by socio-constructivism logic more than merely rationalist-materialist logic.

### *Visegrad Group's Integration Process as A Model to the Western Balkan Countries*

Like the Visegrad group, Western Balkan regionalism began with the involvement of the six Western Balkan states in the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) in 2006. This process previously was supported by members of the Visegrad group pre-accession period. CEFTA serves as a contractual agreement and V4 serves as an informal high-level forum on security and foreign policy issues. A report has found that there is a strong regional dimension in CEFTA which allows sharing experiences in the context of EU integration between V4 and WB (OSW, n.d.). Alternately, CEFTA has another objective which is to encourage member countries to adopt the approach to integration, especially economic integration, in the Western Balkan (and formerly Central and Southeastern Europe) (Tota, 2019). Workshop, know-how information sharing, and policy recommendations on governance and civil society and public administration collaboration are also remodeled based on Visegrad experience (Żornaczuk, 2014). Thus, the Visegrad experience serves as a valuable example to the Western Balkan integration.

Another institution in the Visegrad group representing the external dimension is the Visegrad Four Plus or V4+ has become a tool to support and share know-how between the V4 and Western Balkans (Mogildea, n.d.). Experience-sharing through dialogues, institutional, and agreements are the backbone of V4 and WB relations. Besides CEFTA, there are two institutions which affirm the role of Visegrad sub-regionalism as a model for Western Balkan subregionalism. First, the creation and support of Western Balkans Fund (WBF) which is modeled after the International Visegrad Fund (IVF). In engaging the Western Balkan, the Visegrad Group through the IVF supported the Western Balkans Fund through technical assistance aimed to

strengthen civil society in Western Balkan (Visegrad Fund, n.d. b). IVF plays an important role as democracy, rule of law, freedom of media, and civil society are included as priorities and objectives under the Visegrad+ grant program (Juzová, 2019). Second, facilitation and experience-sharing of the V4 think tank network expertise which is through the partnership of Think Visegrad with the Western Balkan network, the Think Balkans. The think tanks formulate advocacy strategies to integrate Western Balkan into the EU.

The strong intergovernmental characteristic of cooperation in Visegrad remains evident as Dangerfield (2014) suggested. Besides *en masse* actions, each member state leverages their interest to advance further cooperation with the Western Balkan. Poland focuses on stability and security reform, while other V4 countries focus on economy, connectivity, and investment. The Visegrad also serves as a flexible and informal platform – juxtaposed with the EU's high bureaucracy – for cooperation around wide-range of areas. Slovakia holds a different position as it does not recognize Kosovo's statehood yet, however it encourages the extension of Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. Thus, Visegrad's flexible and informal mechanism serves as an alternative to the EU-whole model and provides room for maneuver to promote norms and values. This model can be suitable for the context of Western Balkan seeing the conflicting and reconciliation process of the countries. Therefore, having an intergovernmental platform would increase their leverage, foster reconciliation, while at the same time preserving their sovereignty for incremental confidence-building measures.

However, the region does not aim to export the same model of regional alliance *per se* to the Western Balkan—not to the extent of the Visegrad group—seeing the protracted conflicts between member states. Subregionalism is promoted in the name of increasing connectivity & interdependence, promoting democracy and stability, and other EU values (Rošteková & Rouet, 2014). Despite not exporting the same model of regional alliance, the Visegrad group is committed to export and foster regionalism and interdependence as a means to integrate Western Balkan by promoting shared rules and norms. Through dialogues and forums engaging Western Balkans as well as know-how sharing, reconciliation is in an incremental process in Western Balkan (European Parliament Think Tank, 2019).

Nevertheless, Visegrad group has become an example of past multi-countries

enlargement to the Western Balkan and their experience has been remodeled by the EU in many experience-sharing workshops. First, the Visegrad group could share about its past reconciliation activities, the efforts of building regional identity, as well as fostering civil society organizations in the region, especially in the pathway of entering the European Union standards. Second, the model of pragmatic yet structured informal dialogue could be applied to the Western Balkans Six platform to help the countries define its regional mutual interest as well as contributing to trust-building and reconciliation in the region. These two points made the Visegrad group experience and model valuable to the Western Balkan.

### *Norms, Values, and Identities in Visegrad Group's Policy to Western Balkan*

This paper utilizes the socio-constructivism framework from Flockhart in assessing the rationale and its connection with the efforts made by the Visegrad group to promote Western Balkan integration inside Brussels or in the more extensive European integration process. Trine Flockhart in Smith, Hadfield, and Dunne (2011) specified four main points of socio-constructivism when we apply them to Foreign Policy Analysis; 1) that reality is socially constructed and social facts are essential; 2) focus on ideational such as norms and rules and material structure; 3) focus on the role of identity in shaping political behavior, and 4) the mutual constitutiveness of agents and structure.

The first point of socio-constructivism is that reality is socially constructed. Pouliot (2004) stated how social facts are socially constructed; therefore, the reality is not brute facts. Solidarity in South-eastern and Central Europe between Visegrad countries and Western Balkan is built on a shared perception as a "peripheral and unstable" region in the European Union (Sadecki, 2014). Both regions are formed under post-communist space and depicted as needing socio-economic and political transformation. "Western Balkans" concept entails shared grievance and interest in joining the core "Europe" after the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s and a series of civil wars, a communist past to hopes of more significant trade, and fear of Russian influence in the region. Both regions identify as the larger part of the Central and Southern European identity following the CEFTA. However, Visegrad's "return to Europe" contrasts with the EU's constructed perception of the Western Balkan despite several substantial liberal reforms (Meredith, 2021). Todorova, in *Imagining the*



*Balkans* (1997), emphasizes the stereotype of the Balkan as "the other" part of Europe, less stable, that needs "Europeanization." It is important to note that these values are perceived in a similar understanding (or intersubjectivity) between the EU and Visegrad group. Thus, this inspires the Visegrad group to share knowledge and its model as an example to the Western Balkan as both regions share the same difficulties during the enlargement process.

Socio-constructivism also emphasizes the complementarity of ideational and material structure. Neither actions nor material forces have meaning outside shared knowledge and *vice versa*; meanings could not exist without material structures (Flockhart, 2011). Constructivism puts an emphasis on the importance of norms which as defined by Katzenstein (1996) as a standard of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity. Indeed, many researchers have indicated a strong strategic and economic interest of the Visegrad group in the integration of Western Balkan, yet those material structures cannot function without ideational structure. Ideational structure refers to rules, values, and norms, especially in respect of the rule of law, democracy, human rights, sustainable development, and the free market mechanism. For instance, financial aids by the Visegrad group are always coupled with conditionality for a reform. The infrastructure and connectivity projects were aimed at promoting free trade and regionalism. Despite being blamed for a breeding ground of illiberal turn in the Union, the Visegrad group has advanced democratic transition, and promoted security and stability, rule-of-law, governance, and free-market mechanism for Western Balkan countries. Visegrad group's efforts have always been complemented by the idea of promoting EU values in the region, rather than merely strategic and material assistance. For instance, the Visegrad+ Grants have supported projects contributing to democratization and transformation in Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership regions (Visegrad Fund, n.d.a). V4's relatively better democracy, human rights, and the rule of law conditions compared to the peripheral European region, including Western Balkan, has made them able to become an "imperfect" new democracy author.

Wendt's constructivism emphasized identity-based constructivism. Constructivists believe that identities strongly imply a particular set of interests and preferences (Hopf, 1998). Within the EU enlargement and foreign policy, the VG affirmed its identity as a vehicle supporting EU integration and reforms in Western Balkan (Dangerfield, 2014).

Moreover, Griessler (2018) elaborated that the VG group has taken more of a role in boosting their image and increasing appeal, especially as Central European EU member states with their common heritage and similar approaches to cooperation. Visegrad's "imperfect" embrace of EU identity also shapes its foreign policy. Shared EU values and guiding principles such as democracy, freedom, human rights, and prosperity are values underlined by the V4 countries (Griessler, 2018). On many occasions, such as the Declaration of the Prime Ministers of the V4 countries, celebrating the 30th anniversary of V4 in Krakow, reaffirmed EU values such as human rights, freedom, democracy, and the rule of law (Visegrad, 2021). Moreover, four EPP Group Members from the countries of the Visegrád Group reaffirmed the bloc's commitment to EU values and the rule of law principles. The statement did, however, quote "*adhering to the principles of the rule of law and principles of subsidiarity, particularly in cultural-ethical topics*" (EPP Group, 2021). Regardless, the group incrementally embraces the EU's shared values, despite cultural and historical differences, as the four countries have undergone a significant transformation after decades of 20th-century totalitarianism and Soviet influence.

Promoting EU norms and values based on solidarity and responsibility alongside economic and security cooperation is more motivated by the 'logic of appropriateness' rather than rationality and material gains alone. This is a form of solidarity—not just with the EU but with Western Balkan itself as the region—is facing ongoing socio-economic and political transformation, just like the Visegrad group pre-accession. There are also similar characteristics between Western Balkans and Visegrad Group pre-accession, e. g., semi-authoritarian governments, transitional market, relatively weak civil society, as well as security threats. In conclusion, Visegrad's embrace of its EU identity and its shared identity with Southeastern Europe shape its normative-based approach to cooperation.

The last strand of constructivism focuses on the mutual constitutiveness of agents and structure. While structure shapes states' behavior, agents construct and reconstruct the structure, similar to the quote from Wendt (1995): "*anarchy is what states make of it.*" The EU did not just shape Visegrad countries' policies, member states' interests and policies play a role in shaping policies. For instance, Visegrad's activity in the EU enlargement policy shaped the EU's attitude towards Western Balkan. At the agency

level, the illiberal turn due to populist movement in Visegrad member states shapes the EU's skeptical behavior towards widening the enlargement policy. Thus, constraining Visegrad's maneuver for promoting enlargement prospects for Western Balkan. Juzova (2019) is particularly pessimistic about the Visegrad group's effort for instance, in promoting transparency of justice as the judiciary independence in the V4 itself is threatened. Regardless of its limitations and credibility, the Visegrad group still plays a significant role in the EU's enlargement process in the case of Western Balkan. The V4 countries have shaped the EU's policy to be more receptive towards Western Balkan recently. This can be seen from Poland's contribution both in the Berlin process and in affirming a positive voice in the bloc during the Western Balkan summit in 2019.

This research believes that it is more abundant to see the efforts of the Visegrad Group in Western Balkan integration through socio-constructivism. Compared to the EU's mainly rationalist interest in areas of economic and stability as reflected in the Berlin Process, the Visegrad group has been motivated more by the values of solidarity and logic of appropriateness—mainly by a shared grievance and history with the Western Balkan countries—and driven by identity and their effort to boost their image in the Union. Therefore, the research believes that Visegrad's mechanism and motivations in promoting Western Balkan path to the European Union are best explained by socio-constructivism logic.

### *Prospects and Challenges of Visegrad's Group Role*

The Visegrad Group has affirmed its commitment to actively contribute to the design and promotion of the Union's enlargement policy based on the group's own accession experience; however, two challenges remain—namely, the weakening position of Visegrad member states inside the Union and the balancing attempt between the interests of Western Balkan countries and those of Union member states. First, the rise of right-wing parties hampered both rule of law and freedom of press, especially in the domestic level, which has obstructed the group's legitimacy in the European Union. With the right-wing force inside the government, these governments' policies are seen by the EU to have potentially undermined European practices of democracy and transparency. Hence, the Visegrad can risk its role as the strong supporter of EU enlargement to the south and, consequently, its long-term plan on Euro-Atlantic

integration of Western Balkan countries, remaining reluctant to implement the European values owing to the strong domestic interests (Nič et al., 2012).

An example of the rise of illiberal democracy, as a consequence of right-wing populism in Visegrad countries, is Hungary under the premiership of Viktor Orbán. After the collapse of communist rule, Hungary established a stable parliamentary democracy, leading to its successful accession to the European Union in 2004. However, democratic development took a turn in Hungary after the election of Orbán as prime minister in 2010—especially in the country's policy towards Western Balkans countries—due to a confrontation between Hungary's national and European Union's interests (Griessler & Elek, 2021). Orbán, for instance, has close ties with Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić, Montenegrin president Milo Đukanović, and former Macedonian prime minister Nikola Gruevski—with these leaders plaguing their countries with increasing state capture and abuse of power. Furthermore, the Orbán government passed a decree introducing "misinformation that hinders the government response to the pandemic" (Walker & Rankin, 2020). These actions—stemming from the rise of the right-wing—have caused crises not only in European enlargement policy but also in the Visegrad efforts to support the implementation of European practices in the Western Balkan.

Despite their questionable legitimacy in the lens of the European Union, the Visegrad group still can be an example of "imperfect" democracies from the formerly peripheral regions of the EU, which were influenced by the Soviet Union in the past that can incrementally embrace EU values. Thus, stepbacks are reasonable as they are the young democracy of the EU. Furthermore, their role thus can give a positive signal towards the spread of EU values outside of its border now. In 2006, more than 10 million Euros were deployed by the V4 governments in the field of democracy assistance, and the number is reported to steadily increase the next years after (Kucharczyk & Lovitt, 2008a; 2008b). Despite not having one committed democracy fund, IVF has supported democracy projects such as "The New Democratic Wo/Men of Western Balkans" to increase youth participation in democracy (Humanity in Action BiH, n.d.). This people-to-people and knowledge-sharing approach is influenced by the Visegrad group's historical and cultural proximity to Western Balkan countries.

Second, the Visegrad is balancing the interests of the European Union and

Western Balkan—with the former aiming for more stable, better governed, and implementation of democratic values in governments while the latter struggles between powerful domestic interests and desire for membership in the Union. As mentioned previously, the Union has the Berlin Process to facilitate cooperation between member states and Western Balkan countries with the aims of Western Balkan integration. On the one hand, the Visegrad Group has the experience from their own accession and the geographical proximity to Western Balkan, both enabling the group to become a catalyst for the EU enlargement process. On the other hand, notwithstanding the normative power of the Union, national interests remain prevalent in advancing such a process. As noted by Madhi (2018), Germany—as the initiator of the Berlin Process—sought to "preserve the leading role of EU" in Western Balkan via technical assistance and funding, while France remains skeptical of the ambitious commitments towards the Western Balkans Six, including ones from the Visegrad member states. This reality surfaces while the Visegrad member states are also advancing their own collective agendas—e. g., the Western Balkans Fund—and facing challenges in their national politics. Because of this, it is vital for the Visegrad Group to find a balance between their interests, those of the EU, and those of the Western Balkans countries in order to facilitate a smooth integration process.

Third, EU's unenthusiastic approach might bring backlash to Western Balkan's further interest and commitment in the enlargement process. Despite reassurances and a positive voice during the EU-Western Balkans summit, especially by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, the European Union leaders hesitated to use the term "enlargement" and used vague statements such as "partners" or "European perspective," (Bechev, 2021). There is little appetite in "Old Europe" to bring in new members, reflected by ongoing debate between the 27 member states. This explained why accession negotiation with the six Western Balkan countries had faced a logjam or little to no significant progress. It is important to note for the European Union that the EU is not the only actor in the region, Russia and especially China's increasing presence in the region may affect Western Balkan's commitment. As we know, there is still a long path of reconciliation, ensuring stability, economic connectivity, and institution-building. The chances of seeing enlargement prospects for the Western Balkan in the near future might be slim, despite the Visegrad group's enthusiastic efforts.

Despite the pessimism towards the role of the Visegrad Group in the Western Balkan integration process, the group's role as an influential force multiplier of the EU enlargement process towards the south should be acknowledged based on three reasons, including the funding scheme through the Western Balkans Fund, the geopolitical direction provided to the EU, and the knowledge-sharing process that is absent from the Berlin Process. Deemed the best achievement of the Visegrad Group, the Western Balkans Fund is aimed at projects in fields such as mobility, civil society organization cooperation, research and education, and cross-border cooperation (Madhi, 2018). The funding aims to foster socio-economic development in Western Balkan, which can also accelerate the accession to the EU. The funding—complemented by Visegrad's role both in shaping the EU's agenda to support Western Balkan countries' integration into the Union and in providing assistance based on reconciliation and regional—has solidified Visegrad Group's role in strengthening regional cohesion in Western Balkan as well as to support the European Union enlargement policy. Although the Visegrad group regionalism model might not be best suited to the Western Balkan, the group still plays a vital role in advocating for the enlargement of the six Western Balkan nations.

## **Conclusion**

The transformation of individual Western Balkan states and societies has become a prospect for the implementation of EU enlargement policy, and the Visegrad Group—consisting of Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, and Slovakia—has provided support for Western Balkan to adopt the European values of democracy and human rights. The Western Balkan states strived to become more stable and better governed prior to their accession, yet the EU—currently experiencing the dilemma between widening and deepening its integration—has only provided technical support to the Balkan states. Consequently, the Western Balkans have become more reluctant to implement such values owing to the strong domestic interests and the absence of EU involvement. Due to its geographical proximity and common experience with communism in the Balkans, the Visegrad countries have adopted a common goal to assist the integration of Western Balkan states into the European Union through an embedded cooperation practice with an emphasis on reconciliation and regional identity.

This paper argues that examining Visegrad Group's effort through the socio-



constructivism lens is more fruitful to avoid reductionist and mischaracterization of Visegrad's agency in the European Union. First, the Visegrad group promotes norms and values of free-market mechanism, the rule of law, good governance, democracy, and human rights through positive conditionality. Thus economic gains are not taken for granted. Second, the Visegrad groups tried to model its institution and set an example for Western Balkan. These mechanisms could be explained by the values of solidarity, shared grievance, and logic of appropriateness driven by the Visegrad group's identity as part of the European Union, often undermined by its disobedience of EU's liberal values.

The Visegrad Group has become an agency to balance the aspirations of the European Union and those of Western Balkan countries. Voicing out the strongest support of the EU enlargement policy to the south, the Visegrad has proactively shaped the European agenda via dialogues and the Berlin Process. In order to support the Berlin Process further, the Visegrad has also provided funding schemes aiming to encourage socio-economic development and to foster regional identity through the Visegrad+ grants and the Western Balkans Funds. Retaining the intergovernmental approach, the Group is also committed to integrating Western Balkan into the EU by promoting shared rules and norms—for instance, reforms as a prerequisite to obtaining funding—which has successfully increased socio-economic and political transformation. This approach is consistent with Flockhart's socio-constructivism concept, in which the political behavior of Western Balkan states aligns with those of the Visegrad Group, owing to common heritage and common characteristics before Visegrad's accession to the European Union in 2004.

Therefore, despite the pessimism surrounding the Visegrad's commitment due to the rise of right-wing policies, the Visegrad Group has made several efforts to become a potential actor in bridging the Western Balkan into the EU and the Union's enlargement process. Moreover, the Visegrad countries have contributed to adding values to the enlargement process of the Western Balkan in the EU by advocating for their political involvement, knowledge-sharing and experience-sharing, remodeling its institutions, as well as a normative-based approach by promoting the adoption of EU values in Western Balkan. This article further recommends opening a research agenda to discuss Visegrad Group's effort more through the lens of socio-constructivism on whether the promotion

of EU values by Visegrad Group has been effective or whether their effort has been substantially influential in shaping the EU enlargement debate or contributing to the enlargement process of the Western Balkans.

### Acknowledgement

We thank our colleagues and lecturers, both in Indonesia and in Poland, as this research would not be possible without the extensive support from the Department of International Relations, Universitas Gadjah Mada, from the writing to publication of this article. We also would like to thank the Faculty of Political Sciences and International Studies, University of Warsaw, for their continuous support to authors for this publication.

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964

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