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How to Upgrade Poland's Approach to the Western Balkans? Ideas for the Polish Presidency of the V4

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Ever since the European Union expressed its commitment and support to the Western Balkans states' ambitions to join the Community, the region has for years constituted the central scene for EU enlargement and Common Foreign and Security Policy. Yet, some of the Balkan countries also wish to be included in NATO. Processes linked to accession to both organisations have shown that each country differs in its development and willingness to reform and that there are political difficulties regardless of these countries' attitudes towards the EU or NATO. These factors make the Balkan agenda exceptionally complex and the relationship between the states and the EU and NATO filled with a range of ups and downs.

At a time when EU and individual Member States are engaged in the region, Poland's policy towards the Western Balkans seems fragmented and therefore has brought mixed results. Since security and democratisation of the EU's direct neighbourhood remain Poland's key priorities, it seems essential to undertake initiatives that would contribute to an upgrade of Polish policy towards the Balkans. At the time of dynamic developments in the Balkans a window of opportunity has opened with Poland's presidency of the Visegrad Group (V4). Yet, it will only be beneficial if Poland builds up an approach to the Western Balkans that goes beyond the term of its presidency.

Where are the Western Balkans in Poland's Foreign Policy?

Poland's Western Balkans policy has been uneven and disjointed. After joining NATO and the EU, Polish foreign policy focused on the promotion of democratic values, transferring its experience with transition and providing development aid to countries from the eastern neighbourhood, which since 2009 have been covered by the Eastern Partnership. The Western Balkans are not in the immediate vicinity of Poland, and hence the historical and economic ties with the region are weak. This factor itself means that the country's bilateral relations with the Balkans are not well developed.

Nevertheless, Poland has a good reputation in the Balkans and is perceived as a success story of political and economic transformation and a place with constant development regardless of the economic crisis. The country is seen as a model for using EU funds. Also, Poland already has some experience in sharing know-how with the Balkan countries in some areas. Both this perception and previous cooperation constitute a solid basis to develop further engagement in the Balkans. Moreover, Polish society is very enthusiastic about the question of EU expansion. This process enjoys widespread support in Poland with 69% of residents in favour of further enlargements of the Union. This percentage of support is the highest among the Member States.

So far, Poland's long-term interest in the region has focused primarily on the need to enhance security and stability. It has been involved in nearly all of the stabilisation missions in the Balkans over the last two decades.¹ Such a significant Polish contribution is worth being turned into a more visible presence in the region in political and economic terms as well. To that end, Polish governments have been supporting the integration of this part of Europe with NATO and the EU. Mainly through these

¹ Seventy Polish soldiers serve in Bosnia and Herzegovina within EUFOR's "Althea" mission. Another 160 Polish soldiers are part of the NATO-led Kosovo Forces. The 126 Polish police forces in Kosovo actually form the base for the policing mission within EULEX.

organisations, in addition to regional ones such as the Visegrad Group, has Poland pursued its policy towards the Western Balkans.

Its presence in the Visegrad Group has mobilised Poland to participate in joint actions towards the Western Balkans. This is because the region is, besides the Eastern Partnership, the main area for the group's external activities. Although the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia have placed a high priority on the Balkans in their foreign policy agendas, Poland, however, remains the least engaged in that region of all the V4 countries. For instance, Polish development aid for the Western Balkans is incomparably weaker than that of other Visegrad countries.² Minor Polish activities in the region have led to a situation in which the V4 is sometimes seen by Poland's Visegrad partners as the V3 in so far as joint actions towards the Western Balkans are concerned.

Increased Polish involvement in the Balkans coincided with the country's presidency of the European Union in the second half of 2011. The period of preparation for the presidency saw visits to the region by high-level Polish officials, including the prime minister and foreign minister, who had until then rarely visited the area. But more visible was the Polish presidency's witness of the historic signing of a Treaty of Accession with Croatia. This period required more debate on the Western Balkans within both state institutions and think tanks—which for years had been calling for a more ambitious approach to the region. These allowed us to observe a slight shift in the Polish approach to Balkan issues, and now it would be beneficial to fill this policy with even more action.

Why is it Worth Engaging More in the Balkans?

While maintaining its traditional interest in its eastern neighbours, Poland should develop a clear strategy in its own foreign policy towards the region. There are several reasons to do so. Balkans are the main area of concern for both EU enlargement policy and the Common Foreign and Security Policy, and will remain so throughout this decade. All of the big EU Member States and Poland's partners from the G6 are active in the Western Balkans in both political and economic terms. Since Poland has ambitions to participate in shaping EU policy towards its neighbourhood, the country cannot underestimate in its foreign policy agenda a region that is a priority for a range of common EU external actions and where the CFSP is actually being enacted. A greater commitment to the Balkans could mean Poland would be seen as more than an expert solely in Eastern affairs.

The euro crisis also was reflected in the Balkan countries and shook the paces of their transformation. However, it did not undermine the EU's commitment to enlargement. In 2012, two countries significantly improved the status of their talks with the EU, and Croatia will become a member next year. Still, it is widely acknowledged that there will be no EU enlargement to the east before the accession of the Western Balkan countries. This means that tangible success in this process in the Balkans could possibly lead in the long term to EU cooperation with its eastern partners in a way that the prospect of membership would be available. However, the lack of explicit support for the membership aspirations of the Balkan countries may in fact adversely affect the attitudes of some Member States towards the EU's eastern neighbourhood, especially those that have countries from the region high on their agendas and which are less interested in the eastern dimension. Also, greater Polish engagement in the Balkans does not mean a weakening of the effectiveness of its policy towards the Eastern Partnership countries, but instead would only strengthen Poland's position in projecting EU policy towards its closest surroundings.

In addition to that, the Western Balkans are the only direction for NATO enlargement in the coming years. In view of the fact that security is a key priority in Poland's foreign policy and that the country supports EU–NATO cooperation, it is imperative to stick to clear conditions for membership. However, it is also important to provide unambiguous support for accession for countries that fulfil these conditions. It is significant that Poland, as a security-exporter, participates actively in enlarging the area of stability in Europe and oversees this process.

Developments in recent years proved that energy security is far from perfect in the Balkans. Still, the region is located on the route of key projects to transport energy resources from Asia through South Europe. Poland not only imports these goods from the east but also underlines the need for close cooperation among European partners on energy security issues. The intention to connect the national gas transmission systems of Poland and other Central European countries with the Balkans

² Poland allocated roughly €40,000 in aid to the Balkans in 2012, whereas development assistance from other V4 partners to this region counts in millions of euro annually.

will require synergy between the two regions, and hence seems even more important in this context. One project aimed at enhancing the energy security of both regions will be the first north-south international gas route in this part of Europe, and the main delivery points for alternative gas sources would be placed at Świnoujście LNG gas terminal (Poland) and at Adria LNG gas terminal on the island of Krk (Croatia). Flexibility in gas exchange and the negotiations of contracts will depend on the political relations between the states. A more visible political presence by Poland in the Balkans would create a good atmosphere to intensify trade contacts with the region and facilitate economic cooperation, which until now have been very modest.

Last but not least, wider support for the Balkans' Euro-Atlantic ambitions raises a question about European solidarity. This has always been an outstanding value for Poland. It seems obvious to all Poles that foreign support, advice and assistance are key factors for a successful political and economic transformation.

How Poland Can Strengthen its Balkans Policy: Ideas and Recommendations

Poland's long-term military, police and civil engagement in the stabilisation processes in the Western Balkans, as well as some other involvement constitute great assets and demonstrate Polish interest in the region. However, there still is room to act more intensively to promote Poland's engagement in the Balkans and to integrate that into a comprehensive policy.

Poland's presidency of the Visegrad Group (July 2012–June 2013) enables the country to lead the discussions about actions that the V4 will undertake throughout the year. Since the Western Balkans countries that seek membership in the EU and NATO need active advocates in Europe, every bit of political support counts, especially if it comes from a group of member states. In terms of political declarations towards the region, the V4 is often a step ahead of the EU, and it is worth continuing that approach.

- **Coordination of the Central European Debate about the Western Balkans**

Throughout its year-long presidency of the V4, Poland should guide the group's initiatives and highlight those elements of policy towards the Balkans that are of significant importance from the Polish perspective. Warsaw has planned a high-level meeting of foreign ministers from the Visegrad countries and the Western Balkans that will also be attended by the foreign ministers of Romania and Bulgaria. Until now, a summit dedicated to relations with the Balkan states has been traditionally part of the agendas of the Czech, Hungarian and Slovak presidencies of the V4. Since the ministerial meeting in Warsaw is planned for late October and falls between the publication of the progress reports by the European Commission and the December meeting of the EU Council, the door will be open for a joint V4 declaration addressed to the Member States calling for action according to the Commission's recommendations. Every Balkan country that has manifested the will to develop its democracy and to integrate with the Euro-Atlantic structures is worth a mention in the declaration.

- **Making Use of the European Commission's New Approach to the Accession Negotiations**

The launch of Montenegro's accession talks last June brings a new dynamic to EU enlargement to the Balkans and keeps the process going. But it also brings a new approach to Chapters 23 and 24, which require reforms in the areas of justice and domestic affairs from the very beginning of negotiations. This opens opportunities for Poland to share its experience of reform in the internal affairs sector—in particular in the fight against organised crime and corruption as well as in the implementation of a well-functioning integrated border management system.

Sharing Poland's know-how in these fields with the Balkan states could be justified by at least three reasons. First, in its own transformation period Poland has had good experience in combating organised crime and building-up an efficient border-control system as it guards—reportedly successfully—the external frontiers of both the EU and the Schengen area. Moreover, this country already has shared such experience with Croatia, in 2008 and 2009, and it is worth maintaining such cooperation with other Western Balkan countries. Second, such assistance is likely to turn out to be successful as developments in these areas are weak in most of the countries in the region and the results would be easily visible to their citizens. Finally, the corruption, weak border-control systems and organised crime—which include the smuggling of drugs, weapons and human trafficking—are threats that may reflect in other parts of the continent, including neighbouring Central Europe. Therefore, it is worth considering such assistance to the Balkan countries, especially to those which proceed to negotiation stages. Such support now enables the assisting country to make better use of

supplementary EU resources, although it would be justified to consider own contributions in addition to very modest Polish development assistance to the Balkans.

- **Do Not Leave Macedonia Off the Agenda**

Macedonia has for years not been achieving any progress in talks on EU membership, although after Croatia it is the most-advanced country in the Balkans in terms of reforms. Yet, during the Cypriot presidency of the EU Council, the issue might be discussed even less than before. This is because Cyprus—a close ally to Greece—would not put Macedonia on its presidency agenda, though all the countries from the current EU presidency Troika (Poland, Denmark, Cyprus) have not undermined the need to support enlargement policy. Macedonia itself needs, of course, a strong message of support for its EU path. Since the European Commission, yet again, has recently recommended opening accession negotiations with Macedonia, Poland should consider proposing that the V4 countries issue a reminder in the declaration from the foreign ministers' summit that the Member States should act accordingly to enable the start of Macedonia's talks on membership in the EU. The inclusion of Romania and—what becomes recently even more important—Bulgaria to the statement would make this voice even more audible.

- **Support a Fair Approach to NATO's 'Open Door' Policy**

It seems that Poland is in a privileged position to indicate that the Member States (and the V4 in particular) should call not only for more dynamic action on EU enlargement in the Balkans but also for fair rules regarding the accession of the region's countries to NATO. The conclusions from the Chicago Summit prove that Montenegro could expect an invitation to join the alliance in the short run, and it is important that this state fulfils its obligations under the MAP beforehand. There is also Macedonia, which has already fulfilled the conditions for membership in the alliance but which cannot count on accession until the name dispute with Greece is resolved. However, keeping Macedonia out of NATO in case of possible inflammation of ethnic unrest has proven not to be of interest to particular European members of the alliance. With decreasing U.S. involvement in Europe, some European NATO members outstandingly advocate Macedonia's membership and seek solidarity over this issue. Poland should back up this coalition with other Visegrad countries. It would be therefore adequate to include into the joint V4 declaration support not only for their EU ambitions but also for the NATO ambitions of the Balkan states, as this would be an important voice in the debate.

- **Respond Accordingly to Serbia's Efforts to Approach the EU**

The unexpected changes of the president and the government in Serbia until now have not brought much of a shift in the country's foreign policy declarations: opening the accession negotiations with the EU and the continuation of the dialogue with Kosovo remain priorities. This enables the EU to continue its policy towards Serbia aimed at facilitating Belgrade's dialogue with Pristina and opening the accession negotiations under set conditions, which still may happen in the first half of 2013. Poland should clearly support such a statement because the example of Croatia shows that the initiation of talks on EU membership mobilises governments to conduct specific reforms identified by the Union. Naturally, the fulfilment of clearly established criteria, conditions and benchmarks ought to remain the principle. Poland should not only avoid situations in which it could be associated with a country that barely supports Serbia's aspirations or EU enlargement policy in general but also should visibly back up the actions undertaken by the Union. Poland's presidency of the Visegrad Group could also serve as motivation to support initiatives presented by other Central European partners towards Serbia.

- **Encourage the Leaders of Bosnia and Herzegovina (and Albania) to Enact Reforms**

A list of tasks was given by the EU to Bosnia and Herzegovina in order to enable it to submit a membership application. The country has already missed some deadlines from the "road map" issued by the European Commission last June. This again proves that although Bosnia is home to fairly elected authorities, reforms in such a divided country do not come easily. Poland could remind the leaders of this state that the commitment of the political elites to reforms and transformation brings not only more dynamic general development of the country but also facilitates integration with the EU.

Albania seems to depend on itself in terms of a path to the EU. Since the fall of Communism, this country has not conducted a single election with full respect to democratic standards. It is therefore only up to its political elites whether and when the European Commission recommends starting accession negotiations in response to Albania's application for EU membership from April 2009. Parliamentary elections scheduled for spring 2013 will constitute a litmus test for Albania's commitment

to democratic values and to its integration process with the Union, and will therefore determine the Member States' further actions.

- **Establish Relations with Pristina**

While a range of international players—including the EU—are already engaged in Kosovo, it seems that Poland could also open bilateral relations with this country. Poland is one of very few EU states that maintain no formal bilateral relations with Kosovo. Twelve EU Member States have an embassy there, six EU members have a liaison office and five of them have an accredited embassy. These include countries that have not recognized the independence of Kosovo. In line with the Polish approach to foreign bilateral missions there is no need to open an embassy in Pristina as hundreds of Polish military, police, and civil staff serve in Kosovo and provide a fair reason to accredit this territory via one of Poland's embassies in another Western Balkans country. The most optimal option would be for the Polish embassy in Macedonia to widen its accreditation to Kosovo. This is not only because it would be an unbiased mission to cover this territory but also due to the geographical proximity—there are fewer than 80 kilometres between Skopje and Pristina. Such an accreditation would not require a high financial cost, would help with coordinating Poland's engagement in Kosovo and could open more possibilities to Polish economic and trade presence there.

Beyond the Presidency of the V4

In addition to Poland's traditional engagement in the Western Balkans, the presidency of the EU Council in 2011 stimulated the country's actions towards the region. Other initiatives will be carried out under the presidency of the Visegrad Group and the window of opportunity to proceed within this framework will remain open until mid-2013. The final weeks of the presidency will coincide with the final preparation for Croatia's accession to the EU, scheduled on 1 July 2013. In this period, on the eve of Croatia's accession, it will be useful to promote, yet another time, the Polish contribution to enlargement policy.

Poland's assets in the Western Balkans enable the country to use the current range of favourable conditions to upgrade engagement in the region. The Balkans will remain an important issue for the EU, not only beyond Poland's presidency of the V4 but also beyond this decade. If the enlargement process continues as observed today, possibly one country from this region will have the chance to join the EU before 2020. This clearly suggests that enlargement in the Western Balkans has a long-term prospect, and it is worth making sure now that Poland takes an active part in this policy.