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Changes in Hungary's Policy towards the Western Balkans

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Measures taken by Hungary in the Western Balkans indicate a change in the country's approach to the region. Although accelerating the European integration of the Balkans remains a long-term goal for Hungary, its engagement in domestic politics in the region can hinder achieving this objective. Impeding integration is in line with Russia's goals in the immediate neighbourhood of the EU. It does not serve Poland's interests, the Visegrad Group's suppositions, or the EU's enlargement strategy.

There is political consensus in Hungary on the EU's further enlargement to the Western Balkan states. This, among other factors, stems from the willingness to stabilise the region in the country's immediate neighbourhood and thus, to ensure security for the 300,000 ethnic Hungarians living in Vojvodina, Serbia. Hungary's attachment to EU enlargement is also the result of a positive public attitude. According to data from spring 2018, 61% of Hungarians favour continuing this policy (with 31% against), which is the fifth-highest percentage in the EU (after Spain, Lithuania, Poland, and Romania).

Political Goals. The main long-term goals of Hungary's policy towards the Western Balkans remain European integration and NATO membership of the region's states (apart from Serbia, which does not show such aspirations). Hungary supports the opening of all negotiation chapters with Serbia and Montenegro this year and starting negotiations with Macedonia and Albania as soon as possible. Hungary has used the 2015 mass-migration crisis as another strong argument to accelerate the enlargement process. It points to the key role of the Balkan states in controlling one of the main migration routes to Europe. Also, the decision on Brexit did not lead to questioning the legitimacy of further EU enlargement. To the contrary, the Hungarian government declared that enlargement is "the most important tool for the EU to be strengthened." That is why Hungary encourages other EU Member States and EU institutions to speed up this process. At the same time, the government criticised the European Commission for arguing that it does not see the possibility of expanding the EU during the current term and then for setting the date of enlargement to no earlier than 2025. Hungary also calls on the Visegrad Group to support the European integration of the Balkans more actively. This region is the main direction of external activities for the V4, due to weakened dynamics of cooperation within the framework of the Eastern Partnership programme.

Another goal of the Hungarian government is to strengthen likeminded political forces in the Balkan countries. This is to ensure that it has influence on the domestic politics of these states. Thus, Hungarian ambitions to play the role of a representative of Western Balkans' interests in the EU are increasingly linked to the intention of strengthening political programmes similar to Fidesz's in the immediate neighbourhood of the EU.

Actions. The Hungarian declarations on the need to accelerate Euro-Atlantic integration in the Balkans often have gone hand in hand with the country's strong efforts to achieve this goal. Hungary played a decisive role in the quick completion of accession negotiations with Croatia in June 2011, shortly before the

end of the Hungarian presidency of the Council of the EU. The Hungarian embassy in Podgorica served as NATO Contact Point before Montenegro's accession to the Alliance in June 2017. Hungary was also responsible for the supervision of civilian flights after the reopening of airspace over Kosovo in 2014. In addition, the Hungarian contingent in this partially recognised country is the fifth-largest and accounts for almost a 10th of the international KFOR mission.

Such involvement renders initiatives unknown earlier in Hungary's policy towards the Balkans increasingly visible. They are based on supporting selected political partners, even if this is done at the expense of accelerating the process of European integration of the countries of the region. The clearest example of this is the approach to Macedonia, where Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán supports the largest opposition party, VMRO-DPMNE. When that party was in power in 2006–2017, it often acted undemocratically, which was noticed by the Council of Europe and other organisations. Before last year's local elections in Macedonia, Orbán expressed his support for the former Prime Minister and party Chairman Nikola Gruevski at an election rally in Ohrid. In turn, in June this year, in a video recording addressed to supporters of VMRO-DPMNE, Orbán called for blocking the compromise with Greece in the dispute over the name of the state. Meanwhile, the implementation of this compromise agreement is a condition for resuming Macedonia's EU and NATO integration process.

Such involvement of Hungary in internal affairs in the Balkans is derived from previous government support—and of Orbán, too—for individual political groups or their leaders in the region, regardless of their state function. This was reflected in Orbán's inclusion in the electoral campaign of the party of the then-prime minister of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, in 2014. In Albania, Orbán's partner is Lulzim Basha, chairman of the right-wing Albanian Democratic Party, which since 2013 has remained in opposition after the resignation of Prime Minister Sali Berisha. His undemocratic governments—including widespread electoral violations—left Albania on the periphery of European integration. Of the Bosnian political parties, Fidesz has the most-developed contacts with the conservative Party of Democratic Action of Prime Minister Denis Zvizdić. A common feature of these political parties is their association with the European People's Party (EPP). However, in the case of Montenegro, where no significant party is cooperating with the EPP, Fidesz supports the Social Democratic Party of Montenegro, which has been the main government force since the early 1990s. At the beginning of 2018, not more than a week after the date of the presidential election in Montenegro was announced, Orbán hosted in Budapest a candidate for this office, Milo Đukanović. Being the leader of his party, at that time he did not hold any state function, but since 1991, except for a total of about four years, he served either as prime minister or as president. Such a meeting could be read as support of the candidate of one of the parties in the election in April.

Conclusions. Hungary's actions in the Balkans indicate that when selecting partners in the region, the government is primarily guided by ideological compatibility, even when these parties are not in power. This approach negatively affects the implementation of the main objective in the region related to the Euro-Atlantic integration of the countries of the Western Balkans. Hungary's current policy is calculated to build an alliance in Europe that advocates strong nation-states. This may be at the expense of progress in the integration of the Western Balkans with EU structures. Some of the political allies that are partners of the Hungarian government in countries aspiring to membership in the Union attach little importance to, for example, human rights, the fight against corruption, or to the rule of law, and thus are less prone to factor in the recommendations of the EU institutions in their actions in these areas.

Such interdependence in the approach to the Balkans is clearly shown by the involvement of Hungary in Macedonia, a country with the chance to resume Euro-Atlantic integration after a decade of stagnation. Gruevski, who was supported by the Hungarian government, ignored opinions from the EC and the EP critical of the direction of democratic development in the country while the social democratic Prime Minister Zoran Zaev not only established closer cooperation with the EU institutions but also reached the agreement in the dispute with Greece. Meanwhile, Orbán's appeal to block this compromise has meant a call for delaying the integration of Macedonia into the EU and NATO. In this aspect, Hungarian policy in the Balkans has turned out to be more convergent with the Russian approach, which is calculated to complicate the integration processes in part by maintaining disputes in the EU's immediate neighbourhood, than, for example, with Polish or Visegrad Group policy, consisting of bringing the perspective of EU membership closer to the Balkan countries. Thus, for the first time in nearly three decades of sovereign policy towards the Balkans, the Orbán government has openly taken actions that have been in contradiction with Hungary's long-term objectives towards the region.

Similar elements in Hungarian foreign policy can be observed outside the Balkans as well. They are visible, for example, in the Hungarian approach to Ukraine in the last year. The closer cooperation of Ukraine with its transatlantic partners has been hampered by, among other things, Hungary blocking high-level meetings of the NATO-Ukraine commission and Orbán's recent declaration on there being almost zero chance of Ukraine's membership in the EU. These actions run counter to Poland's ambitions for Union policy towards the Eastern Partnership countries.