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From Think Visegrad to Think Balkans: lessons learned and recommendations

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As part of the cooperation among think tanks from the Visegrad Group and the Western Balkan countries, a project was launched in order to facilitate the establishment of the Think Balkans network based on the idea of the Think Visegrad, a cooperation framework of think tanks in the Visegrad countries. This short paper will give an insight into the operation of Think Visegrad and outline challenges and recommendations for the Think Balkans initiative based on the outcomes of the study visits of V4 experts in the Western Balkan countries' capitals. These study visits allowed the experts to share the idea and benefits of the Think Visegrad with the government and state officials of the Western Balkan countries and gather information about their expectations and concerns as well.

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Disclaimer: *All views expressed in this research paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of International Visegrad Fund.*

Impressum

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Introduction of Think Visegrad

The formation of the Think Visegrad – V4 Think Tank Platform¹ was the priority of the Czech Presidency in the Visegrad Group of 2011–2012. It was launched in 2012 by eight V4 research centres and institutes in order to enhance the cooperation among the Central European think tanks and policy-makers within the Visegrad Group. The Think Visegrad is a network for structured dialogue on issues of strategic regional importance. It analyses key issues for the Visegrad Group (V4), and provides recommendations to the governments of V4 countries, the annual presidencies of the group, and the International Visegrad Fund.

The network adjusts its activities to the thematic priorities of the V4, including EU institutions and policies, EU integration of the Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership, etc. In its efforts, the project also involves other think tanks, research centres, universities and experts from the V4, which underlines its inclusive character.

The work of the network is managed by one of the core members of the network - Slovak Foreign Policy Association as

the technical coordinator and the Think Visegrad coordinators who meet on regular basis (in closed meetings but also at the occasion of annual events called mid-term conferences) to decide on the main organisational questions. Upon the suggestion of EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy, one of the Czech core members of the network, the Think Visegrad Platform agreed to establish a representation in Brussels through EUROPEUM's already existing Brussels office. It continues to be operated by EUROPEUM.

Think Visegrad prepares 4 extensive and detailed long-term analyses focusing on the most important priorities of the Visegrad Group, as well as 6 short-term analyses reflecting the most current and urgent topics every year. Most of the analyses are produced for the internal purposes of the governments of the V4 and the International Visegrad Fund, therefore they are not published. Some analyses, e.g. the V4 Presidency Mid-Term Review², however, are publicly available. ►

¹ <https://think.visegradfund.org/>

- ▶ Beyond policy recommendations, the Think Visegrad provides an additional framework for exchange of best practices with Eastern Partnership and Western Balkan countries in the form of the Civil Servants Mobility Programme. Furthermore, the Think Visegrad offers fellowships to non-V4 experts to carry out research and analyses of topics of strategic importance for the Visegrad Group.

The Think Visegrad Platform has been supported by the MFAs of the V4 since its establishment and has been fully funded by the International Visegrad Fund². Institutional support is provided through the Departments of Analysis and Policy Planning and the national V4 coordinators – who meet regularly - as well as through the year-long rotating V4 Presidencies which also issue the assignments for the analyses. The direct engagement of MFAs and the IVF ensures regional ownership of the Think Visegrad which is essential for its long-term operation.

Benefits of Think Visegrad and questions regarding its operations

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The Think Visegrad Platform facilitates a regular and structured dialogue among the think tanks and the governments of the Visegrad Group on themes of mutual interest. Think tanks can share their views about questions of strategic importance directly with the decision-makers. This way the government sector can benefit from the knowledge and experience gathered by the think tank community and be aware of their concerns and ideas for improvements as well. Within the MFAs of the Visegrad countries, the Planning Departments and V4 coordinators play a key role in channelling the relevant demand of the governments towards the network. The more relevant information is provided to the network, the better the Think Visegrad Platform can meet the governments' demands that could further

² https://think.visegradfund.org/wp-content/uploads/Think-Visegrad_Czech-V4-Presidency-Mid-term-review.pdf

³ Think Visegrad project is treated in a special manner by the IVF. It has its own budget line that is prolonged annually for the period of one year on the basis of delivered narrative and financial report.

increase ownership on both sides. In order to meet all the requests, there might be a need to involve more external experts, especially in the case of topics that require specific expertise which is not at the disposal of the members of the network. This is a usual practice in the Think Visegrad and experts from cooperating institutions in the V4 countries are often invited to work on an analysis.

The Think Visegrad Platform provides also bigger publicity to questions that are priorities for the Visegrad Group and creates an additional channel to support its own agenda within the European Union and among its other partners.

The platform also enhances intergovernmental, government-think tank cooperation as well as cooperation among think tanks not only within the Visegrad Group but in the partner countries as well. The Civil Servant Mobility Programme and the fellowship programmes are good examples of this.

Although the platform has been working for nine years now, a structured way of providing feedback from the governments regarding the analyses prepared by the experts was developed only in 2020⁴. Consequently, it is hard to assess to what extent the analyses have been taken into consideration by the V4 governments or have contributed to governments' or V4 decisions so far. Because of the pandemic the new mechanism could be so far tested only limitedly⁵ but hopefully it will be able to fill this gap in the future.

⁴ The Polish Presidency had organised once a workshop with the participation of the authors of paper which enabled a direct exchange about the papers.

⁵ During the Czech Presidency, there have already been some good experience.

From Think Visegrad to Think Balkans: challenges ahead and possible solutions

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The establishment of the Think Balkans network aims to establish similar cooperation in the Western Balkans as the Think Visegrad does within the Visegrad Group. Think Visegrad experts supporting this initiative participated in study visits to Western Balkan countries' capitals to share experience of the Think Visegrad with government and state officials and gather information about their expectations, concerns, and possible engagement of the Western Balkans governments in such an initiative.

During these visits several challenges have been identified that will have to be overcome before the Think Balkans could become operational. While there are several experience and practices that can be directly applied in the Western Balkans, significant differences in the

circumstances must be noted in order to realistically assess the possibility of establishing such a network in the WB6.

Although the members of the Visegrad Group had also some bilateral and multilateral issues and disputes, those have not hindered the operation of the Visegrad Group and the International Visegrad Fund. In case of the Western Balkan countries, bilateral disputes, especially the unresolved status question of Kosovo, pose essential problems to the creation of the Think Balkans as they undermine any endeavours based on regional cooperation. Consequently, there is no Visegrad Group-like cooperation framework in the region that could provide a stable regional ownership and a political chapeau for the Think Balkans.

Under such political conditions, it will be necessary to avoid research and analysis of high-level political issues in the work of the Think Balkans that are easily politicized. It is essential for the network's operation to involve all countries equally and ensure that all of them benefit from the work of the Think Balkans. Similar to Think Visegrad, the network

should primarily, but not exclusively, focus on topics of mutual interests to all countries like connectivity agenda (energy, transportation, aviation, etc.), green transformation of the economy, environment, cross-border cooperation, migration, common regional market, and culture.

In addition to the disputes among the states in concern, there is also a mistrust between the government and think tanks – at least those that are very critical towards the government – in most parts of the Western Balkans. Therefore, confidence-building among these actors is essential to build a cooperation framework that is based on mutual information-sharing and facilitate exchange between the two sides. There is also lack of experience in the region how to involve civil society's expertise into the work of the states (MFAs, parliaments, etc.), although there is a great need in the Western Balkan countries to preserve and accumulate knowledge, expertise, and experience related to the EU integration process. Furthermore, there is an interest on the side of the ministries and state institutions in the Western Balkans in the Civil

Servant's Mobility Programme as well.

There might be a demand from the side of some states of the region to participate in the selection of the additional think tank members of the Think Balkans platform in the next phase.

Last but not least, most of these countries also face scarce of financial resources and for this reason, there seemed to be lack of willingness to dedicate directly additional financial instruments to this initiative. Nonetheless, the idea of funding the Think Balkans through the Western Balkans Fund that was founded based on the example of the International Visegrad Fund was welcomed by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs.

The IVF plays also a crucial role in funding the Think Balkans initiative in the first phase, and it is ready to continue to do so in line with the memorandum of understanding signed by the IVF and Western Balkans Fund during the Polish presidency of Visegrad group in 2021. However, this is only a temporary support that can't replace a proper regional and sustainable financial background for the initiative.

Recommendations and questions for the study visits

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It is essential to build confidence among the state and non-state actors involved in the work of Think Balkans. Therefore, the establishment of the network might require longer time, more pilot phases and work before the network could be fully operational.

It is recommended that the think tanks participating in the initiative present their work to the governments/MFAs/parliaments in the region in order to highlight how the work of the network could be beneficial for the policy-makers in the WB6 countries.

A full institutional and financial support of WB6 governments/MFAs for the Think Balkans (via Western Balkans Fund or another regional initiative) would ensure regional ownership and sustainability of the initiative.

It is recommended to establish a management and coordination mechanism for Think Balkans, similar

to Think Visegrad coordinators. In order to ensure ownership and better communication between the governments and Think Balkans, it is essential to appoint the possible best contact point within the government structure:

- 1) *through which the network can get relevant information about the demands and priorities,*
- 2) *through which it can ensure that products of Think Balkans will reach the decision-makers, and*
- 3) *through which the network can receive feedback about its products.*

Provision of regular feedback via the above-mentioned contact points or another mechanism can facilitate better cooperation between the members of the network and the governments and improve the work of the network.

Beyond core members, it is suggested to make Think Balkans open to other think tanks, experts and institutions as well. This could also enhance trust of the governments as well if they are given the possibility to have a word in the selection process.

Information about the International Visegrad Fund

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The Visegrad Fund is an international donor organization, established in 2000 by the governments of the Visegrad Group countries—Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia to promote regional cooperation in the Visegrad region (V4) as well as between the V4 region and other countries, especially in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership regions. The Fund does so by awarding €8 million through grants, scholarships and artist residencies provided annually by equal contributions of all the V4 countries. Other donor countries (Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, South Korea, Sweden, Switzerland, the United States) have provided another €10 million through various grant schemes run by the Fund since 2012.

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Information about THINK BALKANS

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The 'Cooperation Instrument for the Western Balkans Think Tanks – THINK BALKANS' project is financially supported by the International Visegrad Fund and builds upon the previously established cooperation between the members of the Southeast European Think Net Network (SEE Think Net) and Think Visegrad as part of the 'Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans: The Berlin Process and Visegrad Group in comparison project'.

Following the successful past cooperation, the **Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis” – Skopje (IDSCS)** is the project coordinator, which, in collaboration with the **European Movement in Serbia (EMinS)**, **Platforma CiviKos** from Kosovo, **Politikon Network** from Montenegro, **Albanian Institute for International Studies (AIIS)** from Albania, **Humanity in Action Bosnia and Herzegovina** from Bosnia and Herzegovina, **Centre for European Perspective (CEP)** from Slovenia, **Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW)** from Poland, **Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade (IFAT)** from Hungary, the **Research Centre of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (RC SFPA)** from Slovakia, and **EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy (EUROPEUM)** from the Czech Republic, will work in achieving the project's goals.

The project duration is 15 months, that is, from October 2020 to January 2022.

Modelling on the Think Visegrad – V4 Think Tank Platform and closely cooperating with it, this project aims to pilot an instrument for the permanent cooperation of Western ►

- ▶ Balkan (WB) think tanks by 1) strengthening the cooperation of think tanks in V4 countries with WB think tanks/analytical institutions; 2) promoting V4 cooperation among experts / policy makers in the WB as a successful regional model open to experience sharing with countries wishing to join the EU; 3) offering V4 expertise on regional cooperation that can help strengthen regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, which represents a crucial aspect of the region's European integration; 4) providing a new platform for strengthening people-to-people links between analytical institutions, think tanks, government institutions from the V4 and the Western Balkans; 5) cultivating inter-regional cooperation between V4 and WB6 on issues of common strategic interest; and 6) encouraging the use of V4 know-how gained through Think Visegrad to help improve dialogue between the relevant state institutions in the WB countries (e.g. between the foreign ministries as well as between the WB think tanks and NGOs and the WB MFAs).

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