

Aleksandar Jazić*

Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade

Serbia's cooperation with the Visegrad Group states after 2000

ABSTRACT

After the political changes in Serbia at the end of 2000, Serbia, then within the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, began to renew its bilateral and multilateral relations. It was logical that the priority countries with which Serbia wants to restore relations should be neighboring countries and countries in the immediate vicinity. That is why the countries of the Visegrad Group were an important partner for Serbia. In addition, the countries of the Visegrad Group had already entered the transition process, and had a similar political legacy. The experiences of the countries of the Visegrad Group and their capacities for cooperation were important for Serbia, where the transition process has just begun, with Serbia's determination to embark on the path of joining the European Union. By the year 2000, the countries of the Visegrad Group had already taken significant steps on their way to joining the European Union, and had a significant place in regional initiatives. By cooperating with them, Serbia was able to speed up its process of political reforms, and accordingly there was a need to join regional initiatives, which it could more easily realize in cooperation with these countries. By establishing cooperation with the countries of the Visegrad Group, Serbia took one of the first and most important steps in its change of foreign policy direction after internal political changes.

KEYWORDS: Serbia, Visegrad Group, European Union, regional cooperation, political cooperation, regional organizations

* jazic@diplomacy.bg.ac.rs

INTRODUCTION

After the changes in 2000, Serbia had to start the transition process of its political and economic system. In addition, Serbia's determination was to join European integration, which should have resulted in its full membership in the European Union (EU). That is why Serbia had to find partners with whom to establish stable cooperation in order to more easily achieve the defined goals. More specifically, Serbia needed partners who have the same goals regarding the reform of the political and economic system, as well as the same foreign policy goals. Accordingly, the most natural step was for Serbia to give priority to establishing cooperation with its neighbors. Neighboring countries defined during the 90s of the 20th century the same political, foreign policy and economic goals that Serbia wanted to achieve after the year 2000. After the political isolation, it was necessary to establish cooperation with neighboring countries on a new basis. Some of the neighboring countries have already taken important steps towards joining the European Union, but also in the area of reforming the political system and transforming economic relations. Establishing good relations with neighbors was also important for political stability in the region. This had the same importance for Serbia and for its neighbors who have not yet completed all political and economic reforms. It was precisely the experiences of neighboring countries that were useful for Serbia in the best way to overcome the problems encountered after the change of the political system. One of the best ways to overcome the problem represented the Visegrad Group (V4), which was formed after the end of the Cold War by Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. These countries had similar experiences in the past in relation to political relations and economy, and in their characteristics they are similar to Serbia, with the exception of Poland, which has a significantly larger territory and population. During the Cold War, the V4 countries had a highly centralized economic system, with an identical organization of the political system. After the Cold War, these countries embarked on reforming the political system and economy in imitation of the countries of Western Europe, while joining the Euro-Atlantic integrations. That is why it was natural that the V4 countries should be important partners that Serbia should rely on during the implementation of political and economic reforms. After establishing stable political and economic cooperation with the V4 countries, Serbia could count on their support on the foreign policy front, that is, in the process of joining the European Union. Also, the V4 countries had an interest, in order to establish stability in the region and their economic development, to establish stable relations with Serbia. In 2000, Serbia had economic capacities that could be connected without major problems to the economic capacities of the V4 countries, which would speed up the development of Serbia and the countries of this regional initiative. In addition, joining Serbia, as well as other countries from Southeast Europe, to European integration would

strengthen the position of the V4 countries. Coordination of foreign policy steps between Serbia and the V4 countries in connection with harmonization with European standards was supposed to speed up their accession to the European Union. Hungary, as a neighboring country, was an important partner among the V4 countries not only because of its proximity, but also because of the numerous Hungarian national minority living in Serbia. This would significantly affect the greater integration of the Hungarian national minority in social and political relations in Serbia, which would contribute to strengthening the stability not only of Serbia, but also of the region as a whole. Of course, such relations would also contribute to a better position of the Serbian national minority in Hungary and their greater participation in Hungarian state institutions. The rapprochement of Serbia and Hungary was supposed to strengthen respect for human and minority rights, which would additionally affect the fulfillment of European standards. Since 2000, the V4 countries have been one of the most important political and economic partners of Serbia during the implementation of reforms whose goal was the formation of modern political institutions, the establishment of a market economy and membership in the European Union.

POLITICAL COOPERATION AND MUTUAL RELATIONS IN THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION OF SERBIA

Poland's interest in the events in the Balkans stems primarily from its membership in the V4. In the second place, Poland wants to contribute to the European security policy and the stability of the EU, and this often depends on the stability of the Balkans. As a third factor, it can be stated that the greater influence of Poland and other EU countries would reduce the influence of Russia in the Balkans. That is why Serbia, as the largest country in the Balkans that is not a member of the EU, is one of Poland's important partners in the field of international cooperation. In accordance with the mentioned reasons, Poland is one of the big supporters of Serbia's entry into the EU. With the entry of Serbia into the EU, it is certain that Poland would strengthen its partnership in its eastern parts, thereby strengthening its position in the EU. Given that Serbia borders Hungary, a member of the V4, the stability of the Balkans and cooperation with Serbia were one of the priorities of this country's foreign policy. Accordingly, Poland, as Hungary's partner in the V4, provided support to this country. This strengthened the solidarity among the countries of this regional initiative in their policy towards Serbia and providing support for it to join the EU as a full member. The problem in relations between Poland and Serbia appeared after the authorities in Pristina declared independence in 2008. At first, Poland was hesitant, but first waited for the United States of America (US) and the largest EU countries to do so. Only after that did Poland decide on recognition, because it was afraid of the emergence of instability

in the Balkans. Another reason for Poland's reluctance was the possibility of strengthening Russian influence in Serbia, which happened after Serbia handed over control of its energy system to Russia. As a third reason, it can be stated that Poland was afraid that similar aspirations of the Russian national minority would not strengthen in its close neighborhood, that is, in the area of Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Poland, regardless of recognition, has not established diplomatic relations with the authorities in Pristina. With this, Poland wanted to show Serbia that it supports it in its foreign policy activities, or at least that it does not want to make it more difficult for it. Consular relations between Poland and the authorities in Pristina were only established at the end of 2022, but with the primary goal of providing consular assistance and protection to Polish citizens.¹ In 2011, Poland assumed the presidency of the Council of the European Union. Poland considered the continuation of European integration as a priority of its presidency. This was an excellent follow-up to the very positive results achieved by Hungary before Poland during its presidency, such as the provision of great support to the neighboring countries, Serbia and Croatia, in their activities in the EU accession process. One of the three main goals of Poland during its transition was to grant Serbia the status of a candidate state. It should be emphasized that in this period, that is, from 2012 to 2016, the Western Balkans was not one of the priorities for Polish diplomacy. Poland developed its attitudes and activities towards the Western Balkans in accordance with its policy within and towards the EU.²

After the political changes in Hungary after the end of the Cold War, the Hungarian authorities based their foreign policy orientation on three points, namely: joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the EU, strengthening relations with neighbors and providing support to the Hungarian national minority in abroad. The Western Balkans has an important place in Hungary's foreign policy, but Serbia is one of its most important partners because of the large number of Hungarians living in Serbia. That is why Hungary was involved in calming tensions during the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, because Croatia also has a certain number of members of the Hungarian national minority. Hungary's relations with Serbia, as well as with other countries of the Western Balkans, are based on EU legal documents and bilateral agreements. After the authorities in Pristina independently declared independence in 2008, Hungary recognized this decision and

¹ See: "Establishment of consular relations between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Kosovo", *Website of the Republic of Poland*, Internet: <https://www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy/establishment-of-consular-relations-between-the-republic-of-poland-and-the-republic-of-kosovo>, (Accessed 22 January 2024).

² See: Artur Adamczyk and Olga Barbarska, "Relations with the Balkans as a Part of Poland's Foreign Policy", in: Artur Adamczyk, Goran Ilik and Kamil Zajączkowski (eds.), *Balkan Ambitions and Polish Inspirations: Experiences, Problems and Challenges*, Centre for Europe, University of Warsaw, 2022, pp. 52–57.

opened diplomatic missions in Pristina. This significantly burdened its relations with Serbia.³ Cross-border cooperation is an important item in the mutual relations between Serbia and Hungary. This cooperation, which began in 2003 under the supervision of the EU, encouraged the development of people-to-people contacts, which contributed to the development of civil society organizations in both countries. In the following period, i.e. from 2004 to 2006, Serbia, Hungary and Romania established the Neighborhood Cooperation Program. In Serbia, this program covered the territory of the city of Belgrade and the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina (AP Vojvodina). Within this program, 46 programs with a total value of around 4 million euros were implemented. With this, Serbia took a positive step towards joining the EU, because the EU pays great attention to the development of cross-border cooperation. The reason is the fact that about 30% of the territory of the EU belongs to the border regions. About 40% of the EU population lives in these regions, so EU institutions are constantly increasing the level of funds intended for the development of cross-border cooperation among member states, but also between member states and neighboring states that are not in the EU. From 2007 to 2013, within the framework of the Instrument for pre-accession assistance (IPA) program, Serbia and Hungary acted together. This implied the existence of joint financial resources and management, as well as joint decision-making. The joint cooperation had two main areas. The first area was infrastructure and environment, while the second area included economy, education and culture. The financial resources that the partners from Serbia and Hungary received within this program amounted to over 50 million euros.⁴

The Czech Republic through the V4, primarily supporting Hungarian and Polish policies in the Balkans, supported Serbia's entry into the EU. Nevertheless, one of the most important areas of international cooperation for the Czech Republic with the countries of the Western Balkans is border protection. Since 2015, Serbia and the Czech Republic have developed and stable bilateral cooperation in this area. It is about cooperation between the police of two countries, which resulted in the presence of about 20 Czech policemen in Negotin. In this case as well, regardless of the fact that it is bilateral cooperation, the Czech Republic supported Serbia in the security of its borders based on the efforts of the V4 and Austria. With this, the Czech Republic supported Serbia's fight against organized crime, as well as in building a system in which there is a rule of law. Regarding political issues related to the European integration of Serbia and other countries of the

³ See: Spasimir Domaradzki, Tomasz Fronczak, Tomas Strazay, Michal Vit and Anna Orosz, "Visegrad Group and the Western Balkans countries", *European Movement in Montenegro*, Podgorica, June 2018, pp. 17–18.

⁴ See: "Serbia and Hungary – Political and Economic Perspectives", *Policy Study*, ISAC Fund and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Belgrade, 2013, pp. 14–15.

Western Balkans, a lack of interest from Czech institutions is noticeable. That is why there is a small share of the Czech Republic in improving the process of European integration in Serbia, that is, bilateral cooperation in this area. Accordingly, there is a lack of presence of civil society organizations from the Czech Republic and Serbia that would accompany and give a new dimension to the developed police cooperation with Serbia. Thus, perhaps the developed police cooperation would have more influence on the development of civil society in Serbia. The combination of the problem of the migrant crisis, which affects the democratic conditions in the EU, and the developed police cooperation between Serbia and the Czech Republic was an opportunity for greater involvement of the Czech Republic in the field of European integration in the Western Balkans. However, there was no greater interest in the Czech Republic, nor within the Visegrad Group, to connect these issues.⁵ The Czech Republic supports Serbia's entry into the EU and opposes the EU slowing down the European integration of Serbia and other countries of the Western Balkans. The Czech Republic wants to deepen cooperation with the EU, and it considers Serbia a key country in the Western Balkans. That is why the Czech Republic's position is that Serbia should be the most important factor in the stability of the region, the development of regional cooperation and the preservation of good bilateral relations in the region. On the other hand, it is necessary for Serbia to invest more effort in harmonizing legal regulations with the EU, strengthening the rule of law, as well as in harmonizing with the EU's foreign and security policy.⁶

Relations between Slovakia and the countries of the Western Balkans have not always been stable, and the last significant imbalance in these relations occurred in 2004 after Slovakia's entry into the EU. The focus of Slovakia's foreign policy in the Western Balkans region is Serbia as the largest country in this region, which was especially visible until 2006. In addition, a certain number of members of the Slovak national minority live in Serbia. The third reason is the great potential for the development of economic cooperation. How important Serbia's place in Slovakia's foreign policy activities is evidenced by the fact that Serbia and Montenegro, when they formed a state union, were the first to receive development aid from this country. After Montenegro gained its independence in 2006, the focus of Slovakia's foreign policy shifted a little more towards this country, and Slovakia's assistance to Montenegro during the preparation for the referendum contributed significantly to this. Slovakia did not recognize the decision of the authorities in Pristina in 2008

⁵ See: Spasimir Domaradzki, Tomasz Fronczak, Tomas Strazay, Michal Vit and Anna Orosz, "Visegrad Group and the Western Balkans countries", op. cit., pp. 11–12.

⁶ See: Nikola Pavlović, "H.E. Tomáš Kuchta, Ambassador of the Czech Republic to Serbia: We have such deep friendly relations", *Diplomacy & Commerce*, 9. March 2022, Internet: <https://www.diplomacyandcommerce.rs/we-have-such-deep-friendly-relations/>, (Accessed 31 January 2024).

to independently declare independence. This significantly strengthened the mutual relations between Serbia and Slovakia, which made Slovakia an important foreign policy partner of Serbia. A significant project supported by Slovak Aid was the establishment of the National Convention on the EU. The goal of the project was the institutionalization of the debate on issues related to the EU, and it was based on the partnership of governmental, non-governmental and business entities. Also, the goal was to open opportunities for experts to acquire additional knowledge about European integration. This project was successfully implemented by the Slovak Foreign Policy Association in the period between 2003 and 2007. Serbia is one of the countries where this project was implemented.⁷

ECONOMIC COOPERATION AND INVESTMENTS FROM V4 COUNTRIES

After 2000, there were several reasons for the beginning and development of cooperation between Serbia and the V4 countries. The first reason was the geographical position, and the second was the fact that Serbia and the V4 countries, with the exception of Poland, are located in the Danube basin. Other reasons are mutual foreign policy relations and common economic interests. Due to the interest in the development of foreign political and economic relations in the Western Balkans region, as well as due to geographical proximity, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia have more developed economic relations with Serbia than Poland. Due to its geographical position, Poland is more focused on the Baltic region. Regardless, Poland is present on the Serbian market, and mutual trade between the two countries is on the rise. Poland has a positive trade balance with Serbia, but its presence is still modest. From 2000 to 2018, mutual trade has grown significantly, but this is little if we take into account the capacities of Poland and the potential of both countries for the further development of trade relations. Also, if Poland's capacities are compared with other V4 countries, the trade exchange with Serbia is still small. Of all the V4 countries, Hungary is convincingly in the first place when it comes to the development of trade relations with Serbia. Hungary ranks high when it comes to countries from which Serbia imports essential goods. On the other hand, the Czech Republic is very important for Serbia as an export market. It should be pointed out that 2/3 of Serbia's trade exchange is with the EU, which means that the V4 countries are an important trade partner of Serbia from that point of view as well. Regardless of the development and constant growth of mutual trade relations, Serbia is not one of the significant trade partners of the V4 countries. For example, in 2018,

⁷ See: Spasimir Domaradzki, Tomasz Fronczak, Tomas Strazay, Michal Vit and Anna Orosz, "Visegrad Group and the Western Balkans countries", op. cit., pp. 45–47.

Hungary placed only 1% of its total production on the Serbian market, while the figures for Poland and Slovakia are 0.39%, and for the Czech Republic 0,32%. On the other hand, in the total import of Hungary, goods from Serbia have a share of only 0,67%. As for the other V4 countries, the share of goods from Serbia in the total imports of Slovakia is 0,45%, the Czech Republic 0,25% and Poland 0,19%. The economic structure of the V4 countries is very similar, and their common feature is a high level of industrial products. The share of industrial products that Serbia exports to the market of the mentioned countries is significant, but the level of industrial capacity in Serbia is not at a high level. This is why Serbia is in an inferior position when it comes to foreign trade relations with EU countries.⁸

After 2000, one of Serbia's plans was to attract foreign direct investments (FDI), primarily through the process of privatization of economic entities. The goal was the influx of large financial resources and the modernization of the economic system in accordance with modern standards. It was believed that FDI would enable Serbia to acquire modern technologies and new knowledge, but also to introduce modern management methods and reform the market. After a certain amount of time it was seen that the desired reforms were not implemented to the extent that was necessary. A large number of dubious privatizations and capital whose origin could not be easily determined appeared. After privatization, many companies ceased to exist or changed their field of business. It should be emphasized that most of the investments were not aimed at the development of the economy through modernization and building of new industrial capacities. Instead, a large number of foreign banks and insurance companies appeared on the Serbian market. The share of the service sector in total FDI is 60%, while 26% of total FDI is directed towards the financial market. Before 2014, the share of FDI in the financial market was higher and amounted to 28%. The share of FDI in the trade sector is 14%, while this share in the transport and storage sector is 13,6%. These data also indicate that the labor market in Serbia is very small and that there is not a satisfactory level of opening new production capacities. That is why it is difficult for Serbia to strengthen its export capacities, and accordingly the trade deficit is growing due to the import of foreign goods into Serbia. The development of the service sector in Serbia does not contribute to the development of industrial production, the reduction of unemployment and the increase of exports, because the greater part of the service sector belongs to consumption.⁹

⁸ See: Ivana Božić Miljković, "Economic Cooperation between the Republic of Serbia and the Member States of the Visegrad Group", *Ekonomický časopis*, 69, č. 2, 2021, pp. 166–169.

⁹ See: Ivan Radenković, "Foreign Direct Investments in Serbia", *Research Series Paper*, No. 6, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Southeast Europe, Belgrade, 2016, pp. 29–31.

In Serbia, there are investments from the V4 countries, and this is another aspect of mutual cooperation. The inflow of investments from the V4 countries to Serbia is regulated by mutual bilateral and multilateral agreements. Compared to the countries of Western Europe, investments from the V4 countries are not high. For example, until 2014, Hungary's investments in Serbia amounted to slightly over 370 million euros, and most of them were directed towards the oil industry, the production of raw materials and the financial sector. Czech investments in Serbia amounted to between 35 and 36 million euros until 2017, and until that moment there were about 200 companies in Serbia whose owners were from the Czech Republic. Investments from this country were directed towards sectors such as telecommunications, finance, construction, automotive industry and mineral water production. Over time, Serbia and the Czech Republic began to develop cooperation in the field of environment. The amount of investments from Slovakia in Serbia reached over 62,5 million euros in 2017. The largest part of investments from Slovakia is directed towards the energy sector, renewable energy sources, food production, and a smaller part towards the auto industry and construction. Polish investments in Serbia are most present in the auto industry, energy sector, construction, chemical industry and in the information technology sector. Investments by companies from Serbia in the V4 countries are very small, and this trend will probably continue, because there are currently no such large companies in Serbia that can easily invest abroad.¹⁰ At the end of this part of the text, it should be pointed out that in the cooperation between Serbia and the V4 countries, Hungary stands out the most in the field of economy. About 15 large companies from Hungary have their representative offices in Serbia. Also, there is a continuous and stable growth of Hungarian investments in Serbia, and the most important should be mentioned the presence of OTP Bank on the Serbian market and the oil company Mol-Intermol.¹¹

OTHER FORMS OF COOPERATION AMONG CENTRAL GOVERNMENTS AND OTHER SUBJECTS

Hungary is one of Serbia's most important partners in its European integration and a country that fully supports Serbia's entry into the EU. The problem for Serbia may be the current relationship between Hungary and the European administration in Brussels, so Hungary currently does not have the status of a reliable member of the EU. A negative impression for Serbia's European integration is left by Serbia's policy, which is very much directed

¹⁰ See: Ivana Božić Miljković, "Economic Cooperation between the Republic of Serbia and the Member States of the Visegrad Group", op. cit., p. 169.

¹¹ See: "Serbia and Hungary – Political and Economic Perspectives", op. cit., pp. 34–35.

towards China, which is also the case with Hungary. EU pressures on Serbia and Hungary are motivated by similar reasons, because the EU points to the weakening of institutions and democracy in both countries. The closeness of the two regimes exists, which additionally strengthens the support for Serbia in its relations with the EU, and there is also a great connection between the two countries through a significant number of the Hungarian national minority in Serbia. We should not forget the similar historical circumstances in which the relations between the two countries developed. Because of all of the above, Serbia and Hungary are great allies in the process of European integration of Serbia.¹² An important aspect of mutual cooperation is the bilateral agreement between the two countries in the field of defense. This agreement was implemented immediately in practice by joining the peacekeeping contingent from Serbia to the joint peacekeeping mission of Hungary and Slovakia in Cyprus. This laid the groundwork for holding joint military exercises between the two countries, and it should also be noted that compared to other countries, Serbia has the largest number of joint military exercises with Hungary and Romania. On a micro level, in Serbia there is continuous and solid cooperation between the main political parties and the parties representing the Hungarian community in Serbia. From 2000 until today, it has often happened that Hungarian minority parties participate in the government in Serbia at different levels.¹³ There is a developed cooperation between Serbia and Hungary in many areas. Infrastructure projects in the field of transport can be taken as an example. For example, the construction of the Belgrade-Budapest high-speed railway with a length of about 350 kilometers is underway. It is a joint project of two states that directly contributes to the improvement of the trans-European railway network.¹⁴

Between the ministries of defense of Serbia and Poland, the Bilateral Military Cooperation Plan was signed for the first time in 2012, and the primary goal was the development of international military cooperation.¹⁵ Over time, this cooperation developed, so education, medicine, archiving and religious services were included as other areas of mutual cooperation.

¹² See: Marko Drajić, "Serbia and Hungary: Hammering Democracy", *Brief Analysis*, Belgrade Center for Security Policy, <https://bezbednost.org/en/publication/serbia-and-hungary-hammering-democracy/>, pp. 8-9, (Accessed 15 January 2024).

¹³ See: Igor Novaković and Anna Orosz, "Overcoming the legacies of the past together: Serbia and Hungary", *Policy Paper*, Institut pro evropskou politiku EUROPEUM, November 2019, pp. 4-5, <https://europeum.org/domains/europeum.org/www/data/articles/policy-paper-srb-hngr.pdf>, (Accessed 22 January 2024).

¹⁴ See more about that: András Gulyás and Áron Kovács, "Accessibility and Network Changes of the Planned Budapest-Belgrade High-speed Railway", Proceedings of 7th Transport Research Arena TRA 2018, April 16-19, 2018, Vienna, Austria.

¹⁵ See: „Потписан план војне сарадње Србије и Пољске”, *Радио телевизија Војводине*, 15. мај 2012, https://rtv.rs/hu/politika/potpisan-plan-vojne-saradnje-srbije-i-poljske_319340.html (Accessed 8 February 2024).

With regard to the European integration of Serbia, an important area of cooperation is the transfer of Poland's experience on the defense and security aspects of joining the EU. More specifically, it is about Poland's experiences in cooperation with the European Defense Agency and activities within the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy. During 2014, most activities were carried out in the field of education, and one of the proposals for further development of cooperation proposed by Serbia was the establishment of cooperation in the field of atomic-biological-chemical defense.¹⁶ At the end of 2022, Serbia established cooperation with Poland in the field of energy. Namely, the Polish company SBB Energy and the company Pro TENT signed the Strategic Partnership Agreement. The main areas of cooperation are innovation, renewable energy sources and low-emission energy sources.¹⁷ This cooperation will certainly include the application of new technologies and scientific results in order to improve energy efficiency in Serbia. Another important aspect is that on the basis of this cooperation, Serbia will more easily harmonize the functioning of its energy system with the regulations that exist in this area in the EU.

In mid-2009, the then ministers of justice of Serbia and Slovakia signed an agreement in Bratislava on cooperation in the reform of the judicial system, enforcement of criminal sanctions and the fight against organized crime, corruption, human and drug trafficking. In addition to the above, cooperation in the exchange of experiences related to the functioning of the notary system was agreed upon.¹⁸ At that moment, the notary system already existed in Slovakia, while Serbia was planning to introduce it, so Slovakia's experiences were significant for it. At the end of 2026, Serbia and Slovakia signed an Agreement on Defense Cooperation. From 2012 to 2016, the Embassy of Slovakia was the Contact Embassy for Serbia's cooperation with NATO, so this Agreement was an excellent continuation of the cooperation between the two countries in the field of defense. The positive experiences of cooperation between the two armies in the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Cyprus were highlighted and further participation of the Serbian Armed Forces contingent in this mission was agreed upon. Further cooperation in the field of defense was agreed upon in accordance with the economic capacities of the two countries, and Slovakia's support for Serbia in European

¹⁶ See: „Plan saradnje sa vojskom Poljske”, *B92*, 15. decembar 2014, https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2014&mm=12&dd=12&nav_category=12&nav_id=935494 (Accessed 8 February 2024).

¹⁷ See: „Potpisivanje ugovora o strateškom poslovnom partnerstvu u oblasti energetike”, *Veb strana Republike Poljske*, 20.12.2022 <https://www.gov.pl/web/srbija/potpisivanje-ugovora-o-stratekom-poslovnom-partnerstvu-u-oblasti-energetike> (Accessed 9 February 2024).

¹⁸ See: „Saradnja Srbije i Slovačke”, *Radio-televizija Srbije*, 5. maj 2009, <https://livecache.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/59599/saradnja-srbije-i-slovačke.html> (Accessed 12 February 2024).

integration was also confirmed.¹⁹ In November 2007, Serbia and Slovakia signed an Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the Slovak Republic on cooperation in the fight against crime. The agreement included cooperation in the areas of: international organized crime, terrorism, narcotics, weapons, human trafficking, counterfeiting of money and documents, illegal financial activities, serious crimes, theft and manipulation of motor vehicles, theft and trade of cultural goods, people smuggling and illegal migrations, crime on the Internet and endangering the environment. Cooperation on the exchange of information on the legal provisions of the two countries on the mentioned criminal acts was also agreed upon. Also, the possibility of extending cooperation to other criminal acts is left open.²⁰

There is good cooperation between Serbia and the Czech Republic at the regional level, that is, between local self-government units. There are currently two agreements on cooperation with local self-government units from Serbia and the Czech Republic. The Autonomous Province of Vojvodina (AP Vojvodina) has cooperation agreements with the Olomouc and Ustec regions. AP Vojvodina and the Olomouc region have been cooperating since 2003 in areas such as: development of entrepreneurial activities, tourism, culture and art, science, technological development, education, sports, health and social care and joint participation in exhibitions and fairs. It was agreed to form a joint Council whose task is to monitor and evaluate the implementation of mutual cooperation. The council is made up of representatives of the AP Vojvodina and the Olomouc region, with each side providing one representative for defined areas of cooperation. The agreement is concluded for an indefinite period of time, and it can be changed and supplemented if necessary, but with the consent of both parties.²¹ In the middle of 2018, AP Vojvodina and the Ústí Region signed a Memorandum of Cooperation. The areas of cooperation defined by this Memorandum are: joint projects in production, professional education and scientific research,

¹⁹ See: „Потписан Споразум о сарадњи у области одбране између влада Србије и Словачке”, *Политика*, 5.12.2016, <https://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/369357/Potpisan-Sporazum-o-saradnji-u-oblasti-odbrane-između-vlada-Srbije-i-Slovacke> (Accessed 12 February 2024).

²⁰ See: „Споразум између Владе Републике Србије и Владе Словачке Републике о сарадњи у борби против криминала”, *Братислава*, 16.11.2007, <http://www.mup.gov.rs/wps/wcm/connect/27e2ffd8-ce7e-49ae-96e3-35c61f003589/Slova%C4%8Dka+-+Sporazum+o+saradnji+u+borbi+protiv+kriminala+sa+Protokolom.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=ncakCхu> (Accessed 12 February 2024).

²¹ See: „Споразум о сарадњи између Аутономне покрајине Војводине (Република Србија, Србија и Црна Гора) и Покрајине Оломоуц (Чешка Република)”, *Република Србија – Аутономна Покрајина Војводина*, https://region.vojvodina.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Sporazum_Olomouc_410.pdf (Accessed 14 February 2024).

health and social policy, development through the implementation of EU-funded projects, tourism and culture. A joint body has not been formed, but the closer ways of implementing this Memorandum and the conditions for realizing cooperation in defined areas are determined at joint meetings that are held periodically. Each of the signatory parties can terminate cooperation at any time without giving a specific reason for such a decision.²²

Cooperation between Serbia and the Czech Republic also exists in other areas. For example, in 2012, the Bilateral Plan on Military Cooperation between Serbia and the Czech Republic was signed. The main areas of cooperation covered by this Plan included military education and student exchange, logistics and atomic-biological-chemical protection.²³ During the visit of the President of the Czech Republic, Zdenek Zeman, in 2019, two cooperation agreements were signed. One agreement was signed in the field of defense, and the other in the field of technological development and innovation. The defense cooperation agreement was signed by the then defense ministers of the two countries. A Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation in the field of innovation, artificial intelligence and robotics was signed between the Cabinet of the Minister for Innovation and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia and the Ministry of Industry and Trade of the Czech Republic.²⁴

CONCLUSION

After 2000, Serbia had to start with the complete transformation of its internal system and the redefinition of its foreign policy direction. In that period, the V4 countries became an important partner of Serbia in many areas. That cooperation developed in connection with the reform of the internal system, but it was also expressed at the international level. This included, of course, the support of the V4 countries to Serbia in its European integration and the transformations that Serbia had to carry out in order to become a member of the EU at one point. The V4 countries are constantly present as

²² See: „Меморандум о сарадњи између Устечког региона (Чешка Република) и Аутономне покрајине Војводине (Република Србија)”, *Република Србија – Аутономна Покрајина Војводина*, https://region.vojvodina.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Ustecki_region___20180607_11952.pdf (Accessed 14 February 2024).

²³ See: “Bilateral Military Cooperation Plan with the Czech Republic Signed”, *Ministry of Defence – Republic of Serbia*, 18.05.2012, <https://www.mod.gov.rs/eng/3878/potpisan-plan-bilateralne-vojne-saradnje-sa-ceskom-republikom-3878> (Accessed 14 February 2024).

²⁴ See: “Cooperation with Czech Republic in field of defence, innovation”, *The Government of the Republic of Serbia*, Belgrade, 11 September 2019, <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/145053/cooperation-with-czech-republic-in-field-of-defence-innovation.php> (Accessed 14 February 2024).

Serbia's partner in solving many problems, but it can be said that the level of their presence is not particularly high. This is normal considering that the V4 countries are not major European and global powers. Their role in the EU is very significant, but not decisive. Nevertheless, the V4 countries are an indispensable partner of Serbia in its cooperation with the EU. It is noticeable that between Serbia and the V4 countries in solving European problems there is cooperation based on the principle of equality. The V4 countries strive to solve current problems through dialogue with Serbia, while using the opportunity to expand cooperation with Serbia. It must be emphasized that the V4 countries are ready to selflessly share their experiences with Serbia related to European integration and reforms of the internal political system. This was very important for Serbia, because it was necessary to find a direction in the implementation of reforms in many areas.

In the field of economy, the situation is similar. There is a significant presence of companies from the V4 countries on the Serbian market, but their share is not large if compared to the most developed EU countries. However, considering that Serbia needs further economic development, and especially for improving the situation on the labor market, economic cooperation with the V4 countries is one of the bases for its further development. It is noticeable that companies from the V4 countries are focused on investing in services and the financial sector on the Serbian market. Certainly, such investments of theirs contribute to the economic development of Serbia, but it would be necessary to involve more companies from the V4 countries operating in industry and production. This would enable the development of Serbia's production capacities, and the cooperation of companies would rise to a higher level. Serbia's investments in the V4 countries are not at a satisfactory level. One of the reasons is the weak production and industrial capacities of Serbia, and another reason can be cited is that a lot of developed Western European companies are present on the markets of the V4 countries. Those companies represent very strong competitors for companies and goods from Serbia.

Relations between Serbia and the V4 countries exist and are stable even outside of political and economic cooperation. This primarily refers to areas such as defense, police cooperation, protection of minority rights and the judiciary. The exchange of experiences with the V4 countries in the field of defense and police is important for Serbia because of the alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU. It can be assumed that the political and economic strengthening of the V4 countries will have an impact on the better position of Serbia due to the close ties that have been established. By better positioning the V4 countries in the EU, the possibility of Serbia's entry into the EU will be greater. With the economic strengthening of the V4 countries, investments from these countries in Serbia will probably grow, because there is a mutual interest in expanding economic cooperation. It would be very important for Serbia to find new modalities for cooperation

with the V4 countries, as well as to consider the possibility of additional rapprochement with these countries.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adamczyk, Artur and Barbarska, Olga, "Relations with the Balkans as a Part of Poland's Foreign Policy", in: Artur Adamczyk, Goran Ilik and Kamil Zajączkowski (eds.), *Balkan Ambitions and Polish Inspirations: Experiences, Problems and Challenges*, Centre for Europe, University of Warsaw, 2022, pp. 37–66.
- "Bilateral Military Cooperation Plan with the Czech Republic Signed", *Ministry of Defence – Republic of Serbia*, 18.05.2012, <https://www.mod.gov.rs/eng/3878/potpisan-plan-bilateralne-vojne-saradnje-sa-ceskom-republikom-3878> (Accessed 14 February 2024).
- Božić Miljković, Ivana, "Economic Cooperation between the Republic of Serbia and the Member States of the Visegrad Group", *Ekonomický časopis*, 69, č. 2, 2021.
- "Cooperation with Czech Republic in field of defence, innovation", *The Government of the Republic of Serbia*, Belgrade, 11 September 2019, <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/145053/cooperation-with-czech-republic-in-field-of-defence-innovation.php> (Accessed 14 February 2024).
- Domaradzki, Spasimir, Fronczak, Tomasz, Strazay, Tomas, Vit, Michal and Orosz, Anna, "Visegrad Group and the Western Balkans countries", *European Movement in Montenegro*, Podgorica, June 2018.
- Drajić, Marko, "Serbia and Hungary: Hammering Democracy", *Brief Analysis*, Belgrade Center for Security Policy, <https://bezbednost.org/en/publication/serbia-and-hungary-hammering-democracy/>, (Accessed 15 January 2024).
- "Establishment of consular relations between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Kosovo", *Website of the Republic of Poland*, Internet: <https://www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy/establishment-of-consular-relations-between-the-republic-of-poland-and-the-republic-of-kosovo>, (Accessed 22 January 2024).
- Gulyás, András and Kovács, Áron, "Accessibility and Network Changes of the Planned Budapest-Belgrade High-speed Railway", *Proceedings of 7th Transport Research Arena TRA 2018*, April 16–19, 2018, Vienna, Austria.
- „Меморандум о сарадњи између Устечког региона (Чешка Република) и Аутономне покрајине Војводине (Република Србија)”, Република Србија – Аутономна Покрајина Војводина, https://region.vojvodina.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Ustecki_region__20180607_11952.pdf (Accessed 14 February 2024).
- Novaković, Igor and Orosz, Anna, "Overcoming the legacies of the past together: Serbia and Hungary", *Policy Paper*, Institut pro evropskou politiku EUROPEUM, November 2019, pp. 4–5, <https://europeum.org/domains/europeum.org/www/data/articles/policy-paper-srb-hngr.pdf>, (Accessed 22 January 2024).

- Pavlović, Nikola, "H.E. Tomáš Kuchta, Ambassador of the Czech Republic to Serbia: We have such deep friendly relations", *Diplomacy & Commerce*, 9. March 2022, Internet: <https://www.diplomacyandcommerce.rs/we-have-such-deep-friendly-relations/>, (Accessed 31 January 2024).
- „Plan saradnje sa vojskom Poljske”, *B92*, 15. decembar 2014, https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2014&mm=12&dd=12&nav_category=12&nav_id=935494 (Accessed 8 February 2024).
- „Потписан план војне сарадње Србије и Пољске”, *Радио телевизија Војводине*, 15. мај 2012, https://rtv.rs/hu/politika/potpisan-plan-vojne-saradnje-srbije-i-poljske_319340.html (Accessed 8 February 2024).
- „Потписан Споразум о сарадњи у области одбране између влада Србије и Словачке”, *Политика*, 5.12.2016, <https://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/369357/Potpisan-Sporazum-o-saradnji-u-oblasti-odbrane-između-vlada-Srbije-i-Slovačke> (Accessed 12 February 2024).
- „Potpisivanje ugovora o strateškom poslovnom partnerstvu u oblasti energetike”, *Vestranica Republike Poljske*, 20.12.2022 <https://www.gov.pl/web/srbija/potpisivanje-ugovora-o-strateškom-poslovnom-partnerstvu-u-oblasti-energetike> (Accessed 9 February 2024).
- Radenković, Ivan, "Foreign Direct Investments in Serbia", *Research Series Paper*, No. 6, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Southeast Europe, Belgrade, 2016.
- „Saradnja Srbije i Slovačke”, *Radio-televizija Srbije*, 5. мај 2009, <https://livecache.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/59599/saradnja-srbije-i-slovačke.html> (Accessed 12 February 2024).
- "Serbia and Hungary – Political and Economic Perspectives", *Policy Study*, ISAC Fund and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Belgrade, 2013.
- „Споразум између Владе Републике Србије и Владе Словачке Републике о сарадњи у борби против криминала”, *Братислава*, 16.11.2007, <http://www.mup.gov.rs/wps/wcm/connect/27e2ffd8-ce7e-49ae-96e3-35c61f003589/Slova%C4%8Dka+-+Sporazum+o+saradnji+u+borbi+protiv+kriminala+sa+Protokolom.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=ncakCxu> (Accessed 12 February 2024).
- „Споразум о сарадњи између Аутономне покрајине Војводине (Република Србија, Србија и Црна Гора) и Покрајине Оломоуц (Чешка Република)”, *Република Србија – Аутономна Покрајина Војводина*, https://region.vojvodina.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Sporazum_Olomouc_410.pdf (Accessed 14 February 2024).