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VISEGRAD GROUP – AFTER 20 YEARS

Abstract: *The year 2011 is referred to as the “Year of the Visegrad Group” – Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. In this year Hungary and Poland alternate as the European Union Presidential country, and, in parallel, Slovakia and Hungary alternate in the position of the Visegrad Group Presidential country. It is also the year when the Visegrad Group commemorates the 20th anniversary of its foundation. The paper outlines the history of the Visegrad Group from its early beginnings which reach back to the 14th century: The author describes major V-4 documents and strategies and key themes. Subchapters deal with the following topics: V-4 and the European Union, V-4 and the Western Balkans, V-4 and Defence and Security Policy, V-4 and energy, economy, transportation, agriculture, culture and tourism. The Central European grouping, the Visegrad Group, confirmed the justification of its existence, its functioning and of its importance for the future. It is stated in the conclusion that the grouping has proved its potential for facing the actual international and global challenges in international affairs, economy, energy, security and in other important spheres.*

Keywords: *International Visegrad Fund, Visegrad Group, Presidency of the Slovak Republic, Visegrad cooperation*

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A. From the Historical Roots to the Present

The year 2011 is being designated as the “Year of the Visegrad Group” – Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. In this year Hungary and Poland alternate as the European Union Presidential country, and, in parallel, Slovakia and Hungary alternate in the position of the Visegrad Group Presidential country. It is also the year when the Visegrad Group commemorates the 20th anniversary of its foundation.

In fact, *the historical roots of this grouping* reach back to the 14th century. Three kingdoms were then competing for power in the Central European region: Czech, Polish and Hungarian. Their representatives met in *Trenčín* (presently in Slovakia) in August 1335 looking for an agreement in territorial issues, mainly between the Czech and Polish king¹. Subsequently, the three kings,

¹ MARSINA, R.: *Trenčianska dohoda z augusta 1335 a jej osudy*. Historický zborník, Matica Slovenská, p. 51.

John of Luxemburg (Czech), Charles Robert (Hungarian) and Kazimir III (Polish) met in *Visegrad* on the Danube River (presently in Hungary). On September 3, 1335, the Czech-Hungarian alliance treaty, and on November 19, 1335, the Czech–Polish Alliance Treaty, were signed. The Visegrad negotiations aimed also at the unification of trade, taxes and trade routes. So this triple alliance was a miniature precursor of the future European Union.

After the fall of the totalitarian regimes in 1989 in all three countries, which were the historical successors of the above-mentioned kingdoms, faced the same type of problems. Besides the acute need of their internal political and economic conversion, they urged for the departure of Soviet occupational troops and the dissolution of the Warsaw pact. *The three countries' representatives met first in Bratislava on April 9, 1990*². Subsequently, the Czecho-Slovak President Václav Havel, the Hungarian President József Antall and the Polish President Lech Walesa met in *Visegrad*, where on *February 15, 1991* they signed the *Declaration on Cooperation between the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Hungary in Striving for European Integration*. This is how the *Visegrad Group* was historically reborn, conceived at that time as V3. It represented for the Western Europe and the USA the grouping of most developed countries in Central Europe. Thanks to the joint V3 pressure on Moscow, on July 1, 1991, the *Warsaw Pact* was dismantled³. On September 27, 1991, a meeting of two triads took place: the V3 with the Benelux. This also contributed to the signature of *Association Agreements* by the all V3 countries in Brussels already in December 1991⁴.

As far as the *NATO* is concerned, sceptical opinions were encountered, mostly in the USA, about the questionable readiness of the V3 for NATO entry. The tendency was to satisfy the V3 ambitions by their integration into the *Partnership for Peace Program*. Then, the voices of the highly respected V3 heads of states were heard and made the point. When the President Bill Clinton arrived in Prague in January 1994, at the meeting with then already V4 heads of states (with the new Slovak President Michal Kováč) he pronounced the historical sentence that the question of their NATO entry was no more “whether”, but “when”⁵. The Czechs, Hungarians and Polish entered the NATO already in 1999. A significant impulse for the NATO integration of Slovakia lagging behind came precisely at the NATO summit in Prague in 2002⁶. The V4 overcame a critical period after the split of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic in 1993. The then Czech Prime Minister did not hide his opinion that V4 was an artificial creation from the Western Europe in order not to help those countries to integrate into EU or NATO, but, on the contrary, to prevent it⁷.

² VONDRA, A.: Visegrad cooperation: how did it start? In: JAGODZINSKI, A., *ibid*, p. 80.

³ JESZENSZKY, G.: The origins and enactment of the „Visegrad idea“. In: JAGODZINSKI, A., *ibid*, p. 61.

⁴ HENNEKAM, B.: Benelux and the Visegrad Group. In: JAGODZINSKI, A., *ibid*, p. 189.

⁵ ANANICZ, A., *ibid*, p. 30.

⁶ SAMSON, I. (ed.): VISEGRAD COUNTRIES, THE EU AND RUSSIA. Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association. Bratislava 2010, p. 46, 70.

⁷ SAMSON, I., *ibid*, p. 145.

Visegrad Group played an important role in the foundation of *CEFTA – Central European Free Trade Association* in Krakow on December 21, 1992. It served as the preparation for the membership in EU. Most of its members became members of CEFTA and then left, because the membership in EU excludes the one in another free trade formation.

After a period of stagnation V4 was revitalised mainly thanks to the *V4 Prime Ministers summit in Bratislava in May 1999* where the document *Content of Visegrad Cooperation*⁸ was adopted. It established the rotating Presidency with one year mandate, one official and one unofficial V4 Prime Ministers' summit in presiding country, regular meetings of governmental, diplomatic and expert representatives of V4. It confirmed that V4 does not want to be institutionalised, it relies on national coordinators in each of V4 countries. Paradoxically, Slovakia's lagging behind the "front runners" for NATO and EU membership and its "home rehabilitation" in the 1998 elections became a new unifying factor⁹.

The only V4 institutionalization step was the creation of the *Visegrad International Fund – VIF* in 2000 seated in Bratislava¹⁰.

After V4 countries' entry in the EU, political scientists considered that the V4 purpose was achieved. This was denied by the *Declaration on Visegrad Group countries cooperation after their entry into the European Union* signed on May 12, 2004 by the V4 Prime Ministers¹¹:

The Jubilee Slovak V4 Presidency

This Slovak Presidency had a special significance. Its motto was: "*The efficient Visegrad – continuity, cohesion, solidarity and mutual information*". The space for cooperation was reinforced also by the fact that all V4 countries governments were formed by right or centre-right coalitions¹². The Slovak V4 Presidency confirmed convincingly the continuity of the V4 key themes respectively to preceding presidencies and introduced several innovative elements¹³. In frames of Slovakia's V4 Presidency, July 2010/June 2011, the following priorities and key themes were established¹⁴, ¹⁵:

- *to intensify the dialogue for synergies of national activities within the V4 and carrying out its plans on the EU level as well as on a broader international level; using in this respect the potential of the "Central Europe's Year in the EU"* (synergies between the Hungarian and Polish EU Presidencies and the Slovak and Czech V4

⁸ <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/main.php?folderID=859&articleID=3937&ctag=articlelist&iid=1>

⁹ BŮTORA, M.: A miracle called Visegrad. In: JAGODZINSKI, A., *ibid*, p. 144.

¹⁰ <http://visegradfund.org/>

¹¹ SAMSON, I, *ibid*, p. 146-147.

¹² STRÁŽAY, T.: Second generation Visegrad. In: Yearbook of Slovakia's Foreign Policy. Research Centre of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association. Bratislava 2011, p. 116.

¹³ *Ibid*, p.117.

¹⁴ [http://www.foreign.gov.sk/App/wcm/media.nsf/vw_ByID/ID_C65E90D9E284F0BBC1257767004DD46C_SK/\\$File/100609_finalny_text_programu_predsednictva_SR_vo_V4.pdf](http://www.foreign.gov.sk/App/wcm/media.nsf/vw_ByID/ID_C65E90D9E284F0BBC1257767004DD46C_SK/$File/100609_finalny_text_programu_predsednictva_SR_vo_V4.pdf)

¹⁵ STRÁŽAY, T., *ibid*, p. 116-117

Presidencies) when forming European policies;

- to foster common values of the V4 countries sharing one geopolitical area with the aim to stabilise and deepen the cooperation in our neighbourhood (mainly the integration and reform ambitions of the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries);

- to support the civic dimension of cooperation, the civic comfort and safety in the V4 region;

- to share and develop the cultural heritage, emphasizing its diversity;

- to deal conjointly with the global and regional topics: the global economic crisis, the international security, including energetic, the climate changes, the migration, the Roma social integration;

- the cooperation with third countries and regional organizations: with the Baltic countries, the Benelux, the Northern Council, the Persian Gulf Countries Cooperation Council, the Central Asia, and with other countries such as Germany, Japan, Israel, USA, Russian Federation, or Turkey.

The following were key and, from many points of view, historical events of the Slovak V4 Presidency:

Summit of V4 Prime Ministers (15 February, 2011) with the Chancellors of Germany and Austria and the Prime Minister of Ukraine, commemorating the 20th anniversary of the V4 establishment. The V4 Prime Ministers signed the *Bratislava Declaration of Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland, and the Slovak Republic on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Visegrad Group*, which assessed the V4 results and identified future challenges. It specifies the V4 priority cooperation areas:

- to contribute actively to a strong Europe and its coherency

- to reinforce the European energetic security

- to complete the V4 transportation infrastructure

- to develop the principles based on the four fundamental freedoms

- to sustain the enlargement of the stability and democracy space in the EU vicinity

- to increase the V4 visibility in third countries

- to sustain the euro Atlantic links¹⁶.

Within this extended format of V4, with Germany and Austria, the six Prime Ministers adopted a joint declaration towards Belarus in which they called on Belarus authorities to immediately release political prisoners and to respect human rights and freedoms.

Extended Ministerial meeting of V4 and Western Balkans countries with the participation of Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy Š. Füle (22 October, 2010).

¹⁶ The Bratislava Declaration of the Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, of the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Visegrad Group, 15 February 2011, Bratislava, <http://old.visegradgroup.eu/main.php?folderID=859&articleID=32697&ctag=articlelist&iid=1> (accessed on 31 October 2011).

Extended Ministerial meeting of V4, Germany and Eastern Partnership countries in the presence of EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy C. Ashton, German Minister of Foreign Affairs G. Westerwelle and Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy Š. Füle (3 March, 2011).

Creation of a High-Level Working Group (HLWG) on Energy – on the impulse of the V4 Economy Ministers – coordinated by the European Commission, the aim of which is to make the North-South Energy Interconnections one of the priorities of the European policy.

Agreement of the V4 Defence Ministers on creating a common EU Battle Group after 2015 (12 May 2011, Levoča).

A more detailed information on the activities of the Slovak Presidency will be presented in the respective thematic areas.

At the conclusion of the V4 Slovak Presidency, it could be assessed that:

- *V4 is more consolidated inwards*, showing possibilities how to boost cooperation among citizens, carrying out infrastructural and regional projects contributing to the civil comfort (bridges, road connections) but also to enhancing security (judicial cooperation, energy);

- *V4 is more consistent towards the EU* – it can clearly formulate its statements, use added value as well as implement regional priorities in the context of European-wide interests;

- *V4 has come closer to citizens* – countries were searching for possibilities how to improve the quality and to extend the provision of services to citizens abroad, while cutting costs and improving the efficiency of resources spent.

Slovakia handed over the V4 Presidency to the Czech Republic *in a very good condition, more vital and respected*¹⁷.

B. Prospects – Cooperation, Challenges, Seeking for common Positions

Political scientists, when evaluating the V4, confirm its merits particularly for the integration process. They point out critically that the V4 was not able to adopt a unified position e.g. to Russia, the Russia – Georgia conflict, the missile defence system placement in the Czech Republic and Poland, the Kosovo independence recognition, the visa policy towards Ukraine, and to the Lisbon Treaty itself – supported by Hungary and Slovakia, while Czech Republic and Poland took a Eurosceptic position¹⁸. The V4 countries progressed sometimes as “cavalier seul”¹⁹. This applies especially to Poland, conscious that geographically and with its population it belongs to large European countries and could succumb to the

¹⁷ Annual Implementation Report of the Program of the Presidency of the Slovak Republic in the Visegrad Group (1 July 2010 – 30 June 2011), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic 2011, p. 1-3.

¹⁸ SAMSON, I., *ibid.*, p. 7-9, 45.

¹⁹ SAMSON, I., *ibid.*, p. 39.

temptation to pass to their “elite club”. In fact it makes already part of such a club – as part of the Weimar triangle, together with France and Germany. It is in particular in looking for common V4 positions that experts see the important role of non-governmental organizations which can communicate flexibly without diplomatic and formal limitations.

International Cooperation

The V4 countries cover a surface of more than 500.000 km² with more than 60 million inhabitants. That is roughly comparable with the surface and the population of France. The V4 overall gross domestic product represented in 2008 more than 800 billion USD, which is comparable with that of Netherland. The overall number of armed forces is around 200,000, which is comparable with Germany or UK²⁰.

The V4 countries have in common a similar geographical position, a comparable surface extent (with the exception of Poland), to a certain extent a common history, especially that of the totalitarian period. They share in common security challenges, be it in military, energy, terrorism, migration or other areas. This concerns in particular those having to take care of the Schengen external frontier.

Slovakia is the smallest V4 country. Logically, it has relatively the greatest interest in the V4 well functioning and self-assertion. In is not by chance that several of the key Visegrad group summits took place precisely in Bratislava. There is also the seat of the International Visegrad Fund. Good neighbourhood relations are right on the second place of the “*International Policy Priorities of the Government of the Slovak Republic for the years*”²¹. In a Slovak Foreign Ministry Document “*Foreign Policy Orientation of the Slovak Republic in the year 2011*” the Visegrad foundation’s 20th anniversary is underlined as an important opportunity for the presentation abroad in 2011²².

Also the other V4 countries (again with the exception of Poland) are small European countries. That is the reason why they have an eminent interest in looking for allies, in order to impose themselves in the competition with the large European states. That is precisely the opportunity offered by the V4. Thanks to this grouping and its internal coordination its members can promote themselves more efficiently in frames of the European Union, as well as of other international organizations, at the world level or at the regional level. Such as the United Nations Organisation, the World Trade Organization, the Organisation for Economical Cooperation and Development.

²⁰ SAMSON, I., *ibid*, p. 26.

²¹ <http://www.mepoforum.sk/zahranicna-politika-sr/dokumenty/zahranicno-politicke-desatoro-novej-vlady-sr/>

²² <http://www.foreign.gov.sk/>

V4 and the European Union

During the Slovak Presidency the V4 sustained the Hungarian EU Presidency and its priorities, which emphasized the added value of Central Europe (V4) within the EU, more particularly in specific issues related to our region (macro-regional cooperation, Danube Strategy, Roma Strategy, and Enlargement Policy).

The Slovak Presidency introduced regular consultation meetings of V4 Prime Ministers before the European Council meetings (in September 2010 with H. Van Rompuy, the President of the European Council, and in December 2010 with J. M. Barroso, the President of the European Commission).

V4 Prime Ministers regularly meet before the European Council meetings with the aim to harmonize their standpoints and compare their positions (energy, budget review, EU Cohesion Policy, Lisbon Treaty change, foodstuff prices, tax harmonisation, economic governance, considering pension reform costs when evaluating the deficit of euro area countries/applying the Stability and Growth Pact).

Foreign Affairs Ministers consult regularly and use also new forms of communication (teleconferences) to discuss EU foreign policy issues (enlargement, Croatia, Montenegro, protection of the rights of EU citizens abroad). Both formats, i.e. on the level of the Prime Ministers as well as Foreign Ministers pointed out to the added value of such communication (a better presentation of interests) and enhanced the importance of Central European countries within the EU²³.

The V4 coordination is manifesting itself also under the form of regular consultations in Brussels in frames of the EU Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER), in the Political and Security Committee (PSC), in the agreements on the mutual support of candidates, or through the presentation of a common position on the EU forums: in relationship to third countries and regions, to the further EU enlargement with respect the West Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries, or to the Schengen cooperation. The common V4 voice became deciding for example when Austria was proposing to delay the V4 states' entry into the Schengen area. EU then adopted the V4 position. If one of the V4 countries gets into the position of the EU Presidential country, it is extremely important for the whole Visegrad group, because the respective country promotes the priorities close to their joint interests.

It is important to realize that in the present EU voting system the weight of the total of V4 countries' votes (58) equals the total of votes of the tandem France – Germany (also 58) that is called the „motor of the European Union“.²⁴

In spite of the actually ongoing economical crises, the V4 image did not suffer significantly. The Visegrad group remains the most efficient and the most forward-looking regional initiative in Central Europe²⁵.

²³ Annual Implementation Report of the Programme of the Presidency of the Slovak Republic in the Visegrad Group (1 July 2010 – 30 June 2011), *ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁴ LIPKOVÁ, L., A KOL.: Európska únia. Bratislava: Sprint dva, 2011, p. 59.

²⁵ STRÁŽAY, T.: Vyšehrad druhej generácie. Ročenka ..., s. 105.

V4 – Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership

V4 is becoming more and more an inspiration for the neighbouring regions, especially the Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans²⁶. The history they shared in common provides to these countries a relative advantage in comparison to their “elderly” partners in the EU: their unique experience from the transformation process, as well as their knowledge of the neighbouring regions. Both mentioned regions make part of the EU priorities in frames of the programmes *European Neighbourhood Policy*, *Eastern Partnership*, *Stabilization and Association Process of the Western Balkans*. A joint V4 approach towards these regions could transfer the V4 from the EU periphery to the action centre, and to end definitely the vision of the Central Europe as a “buffer zone” between the East and the West²⁷. It was precisely one of the V4 countries, Poland, which (together with Sweden) criticized the EU for being too much focused on the Mediterranean area. So, it gave a significant impulsion for the birth of a new EU programme, the Eastern Partnership, in 2008²⁸. That is why it is doubtless a satisfaction for Poland, that the second summit of the Eastern Partnership, that was supposed to take place in Gődöllő during the Hungarian EU Presidency, was postponed to the autumn of 2011, when Poland took over the EU Presidency²⁹. It is also symbolic that the founding summit of the Eastern Partnership took place on May 7, 2009 in Prague during the Czech EU Presidency³⁰. The Eastern Partnership includes Armenia, Azerbaijan, White Russia, Georgia, Moldavia and Ukraine.

As *the most visible initiative* during the recent Slovak V4 Presidency could be considered *the enlarged Foreign Ministers' meeting, with the participation of Foreign Ministers from Western Balkans countries*. It confirmed the high interest of V4 countries to support integration and transformation processes in the Western Balkans; it also helped keep the enlargement issue on the EU level (this significantly helped Montenegro to be granted the status of a candidate country and to finalise accession negotiations with Croatia). Creation of space for a dialogue between Belgrade and Prishtina was also the added value of this meeting. In their final statements, the V4 Ministers supported visa liberalisation for citizens of Western-Balkans countries, the EU and NATO enlargement, and settlement of some pending regional problems. *The innovation in comparison with similar enterprises during previous V4 Presidencies* was the conference *in cooperation with the non-governmental sector “EU Enlargement in 2011 – Make not Break”*, on the eve of the ministerial meeting. Its output was the concrete recommendations for the V4 governments. For the V4 it is strategically interesting to have the Western Balkans countries, after their EU entry, as grateful allies. The V4 key role in the development

²⁶ STRÁŽAY, T., p. 105.

²⁷ DULEBA, A., STRÁŽAY, T.: New chances, new challenges. In: JAGODZINSKI, A., *ibid*, p. 146.

²⁸ SAMSON, I., *ibid*, p. 138.

²⁹ <http://aktualne.centrum.sk/zahranicie/europa/clanek.phtml?id=1226620>

³⁰ <http://register.consilium.europa.eu/pdf/sk/09/st08/st08435.sk09.pdf>

assistance to the Western Balkans was pointed out in the recommendations of the conference on EU enlargement in the Western Balkans area, organized by the Slovak Atlantic Society in 2011³¹.

The former Slovak Minister of International Relations Pavol Demeš emphasizes that the V4 and the International Visegrad Fund can be a good example especially for the Western Balkans countries³². Analogically, Tomáš Strážay considers the V4 as a model for regional groupings in the neighbouring regions of East and South-East Europe³³. And this is facilitated by the fact that in the South East Europe a Council for Regional Cooperation was established in 2008³⁴. The Western Balkans countries are, moreover, members of the CEFTA, which was created thanks to the V4.

During the same Slovak V4 Presidency, *another enlarged Foreign Ministers' meeting* took place in Bratislava, with their counterparts from the *Eastern Partnership* countries and with EU representatives³⁵. Based on the Slovak Presidency initiative, the V4 Foreign Affairs Ministers supported the proposal to enhance the V4 cooperation and to strengthen its synergy within the Eastern Partnership Programme, using the tools of the International Visegrad Fund, including the increase of the IVF budget from 2012 on. The meeting's purpose was to send a strong signal of the V4 support to the Eastern Partnership policy. It expressed the readiness to share V4 countries' experience from their reforms and their transformation with their Eastern partners, as well as to support the Eastern Partnership initiatives from the International Visegrad Fund. They appreciated the importance of the *Civil Society Forum*. The principle of differentiation and of "more for more" was underlined. It means more EU assistance to those Eastern partners, which are ready to go farther and quicker in the accomplishment of their engagements. The foreign ministers encouraged the EU and Ukraine to finalise the Association Agreement negotiations, including the agreement on the Deepened and Complex Free Trade Area (DCFTA). They welcomed the determination of the pro-Europe oriented Governments of Moldavia and Georgia and their will to progress in the Association Agreement negotiations, as well as the initiation of similar Agreement negotiations with Armenia and Azerbaijan. Also the launch of the instrument *Eastern Partners Facility and Technical Policy Trust Fund*, and the idea of foundation of *Entrepreneurs from Eastern Partnership* were also appreciated. The foreign ministers encouraged the European Parliament for the activation of the Parliamentary Assembly EURONEST and the Committee for Regions for the creation of the Conference of Eastern Partnership for regional and local managements³⁶.

³¹ <http://www.ata-sac.org/section-254-EU-Enlargement-in-the-Balkans-in-2011-Make-Not-Break>

³² DEMEŠ, P.: Visegrad Dreams. In: JAGODZINSKI, A., *ibid*, p. 39.

³³ STRÁŽAY, T.: Inšpirujúci Visegrád alebo Výročné zamyslenie nad možnosťami exportu visegrádskeho modelu. *Mezinárodní politika*. 2011, 35, 3, p. 7-8.

³⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regional_Co-operation_Council

³⁵ <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/main.php?folderID=1&articleID=32897&ctag=articlelist&iid=1>

³⁶ <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/main.php?folderID=1&articleID=32897&ctag=articlelist&iid=1>

Another novelty of the Slovak Presidency was *the meeting of Foreign Ministers of V4 and Germany on the situation in the EU Southern neighbourhood* and on the so-called *Southern dimension of the EU Neighbourhood Policy*. They adopted a joint declaration on the Southern EU Neighbourhood Policy³⁷. All V4 countries participated in the international conference in London where readiness to share relevant experience from transformation with countries of the Southern Neighbourhood was expressed. The participation of Poland in the Contact Group on Libya meetings created a space for further intensive communication enabling the assessment of current developments.

It confirms at the same time the advantages of the V4 resistance to the institutionalisation, which provides a greater flexibility to the V4 with respect to actual international problems, such as those in Libya or Egypt³⁸.

V4 and Countries outside the EU

Let us mention just a few examples during the Slovak Presidency. On 6 June, 2011 a *ministerial meeting of V4 and Japanese Ministers of Foreign Affairs* was held on the margins of the ASEM meeting, confirming a special statute of cooperation aimed at economic dimension, innovation, climate changes. The Slovak Presidency carried on with an active diplomacy also at the level of political directors of Ministries of Foreign Affairs who jointly visited the USA, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Ukraine. Consultations with Israel were also held on this level.

V4 and Consular – Diplomatic Cooperation

On the basis of a V4 heads of diplomacy agreement (14 September, Bratislava), the *letters were exchanged among the V4 Foreign Affairs Ministers* in which they informed each other about the current status of the network of diplomatic representations of V4 abroad and possibilities for a more efficient, even shared, utilisation of premises and buildings owned by our countries. The possibilities of mutual cooperation in this field were identified in 2 directions – establishing V4 houses or receiving/sending V4 diplomats and consular officials on V4 diplomatic missions to territories where no other Visegrad country has an efficient diplomatic/consular representation. The first Visegrad House in Cape Town in South Africa has been successfully developed since March 2010. Expert-level discussions were launched about a potential V4 House establishment in Ukraine. During the Slovak Presidency established by the V4 Foreign Affairs Ministers established a *Working Group on the cooperation in using diplomatic networks and in consular and visa assistance*³⁹.

³⁷ <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/main.php?folderID=1&articleID=32897&ctag=articlelist&iid=1>

³⁸ STRÁŽAY, T., *ibid.*, p.

³⁹ Annual Implementation Report of the Program of the Presidency of the Slovak Republic in the Visegrad Group (1 July 2010 – 30 June 2011), p. 5.

V4 and Defence and Security Policy

The period before the V4 countries' entrance to NATO, as well as after that, gave a stimulus for discussions in expert and other forums, governmental and non-governmental. So, they realized better that it is better to cope collectively to global security challenges. Among those are such as the international terrorism, mass destruction weapons, ballistic missiles, or states encouraging the international terrorism and other world menaces. This creates the common "Visegrad identity" also in the security area. It is also true that in spite of such common identity consciousness, there can be contradictory stand points of the different V4 countries, such as for example regarding the topic of the US anti-missile system in Czech Republic and Poland, or of the conflict Russia – Georgia.

The Slovak Presidency focused on performing the following priorities:

- *to improve consultations of V4 countries about the topics of their common interest in NATO and the EU;*

- *to establish a common EU Battle Group of the V4 countries.* The intention to make a political decision about establishing the *V4 EU Battle Group* was made at the meeting of the V4 and Ukraine Defence Ministers in Levoča on 12 May 2011 where the establishment of this Battle Group in the first half-year of 2016 was announced, with Poland as the leading country, the Ukraine will also participate⁴⁰.

- *to create a multi-national Safety and Defence Course.* From the academic year 2012/2013, the Academy of Armed Forces in cooperation with the University of Defence in Brno is going to open a joint pilot project on the basis of our KNB course and their General Staff Course – as a part of a joint educational programme with a defined teaching content and extent.

- *to develop cooperation in creating capabilities and in the armament area.* The V4 Chiefs of Defence expressed their intention to improve a coordination and consultation mechanism of the V4 Armed Forces. The debates resulted in an agreement to establish a group of experts in order to identify a common approach to the understanding of the capabilities development in relation to the proclaimed concepts as *Smart Defence, or Pooling and Sharing*. The leading role in this group will be rotating in line with the V4 Presidency cycle⁴¹.

The content of V4 cooperation was determined by an analysis elaborated by V4 NGOs as a part of the IVF project – *Visegrad Security Cooperation Initiative*, containing common recommendations of V4 experts for further cooperation of the V4 in the areas of security and defence. The Slovak Atlantic Commission, in particular, submitted a series of proposals in order to make the V4 cooperation more efficient in the fields of defence and security. Among them figure the joint regional nominations in frames of NATO, the creation of a joint fight unit in frames of EU, the joint military training, in particular the very expensive so called "general course", or the wholesale joint purchase of military equipment⁴².

⁴⁰ <http://www.webnoviny.sk/slovensko/ministri-obrany-budu-hovorit-o-spoloc/348097-clanok.html>

⁴¹ Annual

⁴² <http://www.ata-sac.org/article-37-485-Spolupraca-V4-v-oblasti-obrany-by-sa-mala-posilnit>

V4 and Energy

The crisis related to gas supply from Russia to Slovakia in January 2009 was one of the serious impulses for coping with the energetic security and guarantee topic at the floor of the EU. It was, at the same time, an example showing how the V4 countries can help each other – the Czech Republic coordinated and mediated the gas supplies from Germany to Slovakia. Slovakia is the most dependent among the V4 countries on gas supplies from Russia – 100%, while Hungary and Poland only around 50%⁴³. The fact is that Russia has the largest world natural gas reserves and remains the most important provider for the Western and Central Europe. This corresponds with the Russia's effort to maintain its deciding influence in the Forum of Gas Exporting Countries. Russia initiated this Forum in 2007, and it includes countries such as Algeria, Iran and Qatar. That is a serious impulse for the EU to find an alternative gas supply, mainly from Central Asia. The Nabucco Project (the main gas source is from Azerbaijan a probably from Turkmenistan) will not entirely compensate the gas supplies from Russia, but it will undermine the Russian gas monopoly.

During the Czech EU Presidency a Summit Nabucco took place in Budapest on January 27, 2009, where representatives of European financial institutions – the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development – confirmed their support for the project. The European Commission proposed a contribution of 250 mil. EURO through the European Investment Bank. On the eve of the Summit on the Southern Corridor in Prague on 8 May 2009 the European Parliament confirmed a contribution of 200 mil. EURO for the pipeline Nabucco construction. Moreover an intergovernmental agreement was achieved between Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Turkey, which was then signed by the respective Prime Ministers in Ankara on 13 July 2009⁴⁴.

According to the international experts' recommendation the V4 should be pushing in Brussels for an essential revision of Transeuropean Energetic Networks in the sense of the recommendations of the Action Plan for Energetic Security and Solidarity of the European Union. Moreover, to study the economic and technical possibilities for the transversal interconnection of gas pipelines (including the access to the containers of liquid natural gas – LNG), of gas containers, as well as the integration and the renovation of electric distribution networks. A key role has the creation of the North–South gas pipelines between Hungary and Poland. The LNG is considered as an important substitute for traditional pipelines and could play a key role after the finalization of the LNG terminal in Swinoujscie in Poland and Adria in Croatia. The V4 should moreover concentrate on new energy sources diversification⁴⁵.

⁴³ SAMSON, I., cit. dielo, p. 95.

⁴⁴ SAMSON, I., cit. dielo, p. 97-98.

⁴⁵ SAMSON, I., cit. dielo, p.11, 99-100.

The Slovak Atlantic Commission reached similar conclusions in the project Visegrad Security Cooperation Initiative⁴⁶. It recommends the North–South gas networks interconnection and the creation of a unified regional energetic market and of a common energetic infrastructure of V4 countries. This would be achieved not only by the interconnection of electric and gas networks, but also by a joint negotiation of natural gas prices, which would lower its price. The Commission recommends a further reinforcement of research and development in the field of energy, in particular the clean technologies for the carbon that is abundant in the region, as well as the biomass and biofuels.

The meeting of the Ministers responsible for Energy (25 January 2011) covered issues of cooperation of the V4 region in the areas of electric energy, oil and gas industry, exchange of viewpoints on strategic EU documents related to energy (Energy 2020, Energy Infrastructure Priorities) and the support of energy science and research. Their joint declaration outlined the basic conditions for the *North–South Energetic Corridor*, which should start functioning in 2020 at the latest. One of this meeting’s outputs was a V4 Economy ministers’ letter to the European Commissioner for Energy, Gunther Oettinger, appealing to maximise the endeavour for the North–South Gas Corridor with the EU financial support⁴⁷. On the basis of the letter, the EC included the North-South Interconnections in Central Europe and in the gas and electric energy industry among its top priorities in its announcement “*Energy Infrastructure Priorities until 2020 and beyond*”. This resulted in the establishment of a *High Level Working Group on North-South Interconnections*, coordinated by the European Commission (EC). This group is going to draw up an Action Plan in the course of 2011 with diversified projects in the areas of gas industry, electric energy and oil. V4, Bulgaria and Romania are members of the group; Croatia has a status of an observer.

The V4 Ministers responsible for Energy’s meeting concerned also the measures for the continuous petrol supply through the pipeline *Družba*, as well as the examination of possibilities for the petrol supply diversification. That could be reached by the renovation of the existing Adria pipeline, or the capacity increase of the pipeline TAL, or other diversification possibilities. They confirmed as well the need for cooperation increase in the research and the development, especially with respect to nuclear energy and the clean carbon technologies; the cooperation increase in the provision of guarantees for the supplies of electricity, gas and petrol; the solidarity mechanism in case of their interruption; the cooperation in relation to the newly formed High Level Expert Group on North–South Interconnections in Central and Eastern Europe, in order to prevent a duplicity of activities; the need for mechanisms for crisis periods. In this respect, there was an important Agreement signed by the Prime Ministers of Slovakia and Hungary on 28 January 2011 between the Government of the Slovak Republic and the Government of the Republic of

⁴⁶ <http://www.webnoviny.sk/slovensko/energeticka-infrastruktura-v4-by-sa-m/193332-clanok.html>

⁴⁷ Declaration of V4 Energy Ministers, Bratislava, 25 January 2011, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/main.php?folderID=830&articleID=32574&ctag=articlelist&iid=1> (prístup 31.10.2011).

Hungary on cooperation in construction, operation, maintenance, reconstruction, and operational recovery after breakdown of the hydrocarbon transmission pipelines crossing the common state borders. In May 2011 an informal meeting of the Energy Council was held where a joint V4 candidature to the position of the Secretary General of the Energy Charter Secretariat was announced.

The recent opening of the pipeline North–South, between Russian city of Vyborg and the German city of Lublin, will have an effect also on Slovakia. The gas for France and Germany will not pass any more through the Slovak territory. Thus, it will avoid the Ukrainian “bottleneck”. This new interconnection system will also help in case of an eventual new gas flow blockade from Ukraine to Slovakia, thanks to reversibility systems in the pipelines connecting Slovakia and Austria and the Czech Republic.

V4 and Economy

The expert team from the International Centre for Democratic Transition in Budapest elaborated in 2010 an analytical study, dedicated in particular to economic trends in the V4⁴⁸. They mention that one of the impulses for a narrower cooperation in V4 was the Russian capital growing influence in Central Europe. They also observe that the West perceived the V4 potential for cooperation as a maturity manifestation for integration – that was a strong motive for their cooperation and for the birth of CEFTA. It is pointed out that among the V4 countries admission conditions to the EU there also appeared such ones, which were not included in the Rome contract of 1957. One of such hidden conditions was the mutual cooperation intensification among them, and that brought a positive effect. In the 90ies, The Visegrad Group became for the West a symbol of most developed Central European countries, a certain elite. In 1998, the world media started to use for these countries instead of the term “diverging markets” the term “converging markets”⁴⁹. The V4 economic increase at the beginning of the 21st Century contrasted with the West economy slow. This study warns at the same time that the V4 states have similar comparative advantages and man power productivity, because their economies do not function in a complementary, but in a competitive way in relation to the foreign capital. The team chose certain of the Lisbon agenda criterions for the comparison of the economic development in the V4 from the beginning of the EU accession talks in 1998 until the beginning of the world crisis in 2008. In that comparison the highest Gross Domestic Product per capita was reached in the Slovak Republic. Slovakia was also the leader in the labour productivity increase. It was the Czech Republic and Slovakia, which coped the best with the unemployment increase⁵⁰. This study points out the essential differences in the economy of the V4 individual countries that

⁴⁸ JOINT AUTHORS: Sharing the experiences of Visegrad cooperation in the Western Balkans and in the Eastern Neighbourhood Countries. International Centre for Democratic Transition. Budapešť 2010, p. 103-136.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 105-109.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 123-126.

complicate the prognosis of their further development. It argues that the linkage of Slovakia's economy to EURO was a relative advantage at the beginning of the world economy crisis, but can become a weak spot for the future. That is the excessive Slovakia's specialisation on the automobile industry.

V4 and Transportation

The main topic of the *meeting of V4 Transport Ministers* (High Tatras, 25 - 26 November 2010) was the *competitiveness and transport interconnection* within the V4 and the European Union. There was a V4 meeting held on 31 March 2011 here the 1st Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister J. Figel' signed, on the governmental level, the *CETC Agreement - Central European Transport Corridor*. Other V4 countries signed this Agreement in June 2010. The CETC-ROUTE 65 Corridor covers an area of approximately 230,000 km² (from Skåne, Southern Sweden), through the Baltic Sea (Świnoujście – Ystad), Central Europe down to the Adriatic Sea. It also includes transport junctions connecting Europe with the Middle East and Asia.

V4 and Agriculture

On 9 November 2010 Bratislava hosted a meeting of *Ministers of Agriculture of V4+2* (Bulgaria and Romania). The aim of the meeting was to intensify the mutual cooperation and to discuss material issues having an impact on the future Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Having in mind the need and necessity to introduce agricultural reforms, as well as the economic condition of member states, the participants decided to adopt a joint declaration on the CAP reform at the level of the present delegation leaders, the so-called *Bratislava Declaration*".

On 21 November 2010, during the Slovak Presidency, an expert discussion of G11 (10 new EU Members and Portugal) and the European Commission was held in Brussels focused on the issues of the CAP and structural funds.

V4 and Culture and Tourism

The culture doubtfully is the least problematic and presently a very perspective V4 cooperation area. It is symbolic, from the mutual harmony point of view that there is a V4 Orchestra gathering young talents from all V4 countries. In frames of the above-mentioned Regional Partnership, the cooperation in the field of culture functions on the Central European Cultural Platform. But also in this area it is pointed out critically that the V4 members do not cooperate enough for the use of this cultural potential, e. g. in the field of tourism⁵¹. An efficient cooperation would include thematic itineraries connecting the V4 countries, for the use of foreign

⁵¹ SOMOGYI, F.: Visegrad 15 years from now. In: JAGODZINSKI, A., cit. dielo, p. 228.

visitors. A good example can be a recently published itinerary linking together Roman sites in the V4 and Regional Partnership countries⁵².

The V4 Ministers of Culture at a meeting in Červený Kameň nearby Bratislava on April 8, 2011⁵³ agreed on writing a *joint letter to the President of the European Commission and the Commissioner for Culture and Education* requiring to retain independent programmes *CULTURE* and *MEDIA*. They emphasized the importance of EU funds for the development of the cultural infrastructure, for the cultural heritage preservation and for the cultural projects' implementation.

This linked up thematically with the V4 representatives meeting in Košice on May 2 2011, where they signed a joint protocol on the cooperation in the field of tourism, under a symbolic name *Quartet*. Its purpose is a synergy in tourism field, the sharing of related information on the statistics, the legislation, the possibilities of exploiting structural funds etc. Each of the V4 countries delimited 450,000 EURO for the project marketing strategy⁵⁴.

At the meeting of *State Secretaries* of Ministries responsible for the *Tourist Industry* in V4 countries and directors of the V4 national tourist industry organisations (Košice, 28 – 30 April 2011) the *Protocol on Tourism Cooperation* was signed between the Ministries responsible for the tourist industry in the V4 countries. The Protocol also includes a 2011 Marketing Plan signed by directors of national marketing agencies in the V4 countries. They assessed the fulfilment of priorities of the Slovak Presidency in the tourist industry and discussed the following topics:

- cooperation of national tourist industry organizations of the V4 countries as a part of the project “*European Quartet – One Melody*”;
- presentation of joint interests related to the tourist industry of the V4 countries in third markets;
- creation of a uniform image of the V4 countries as a tourist destination through the renewal of the common V4 website;
- exchange of information on crisis-combating measures and solutions and the support of common interests of the V4 countries in this respect.

V4 and Social Policy

On 22 March 2011 Bratislava hosted an international *Ministerial conference* organised by the Slovak Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family during the Slovak V4 Presidency: “*Impact of the global economic crisis on unemployment and the labour market revival*”. The main objective of the conference was to exchange experience on the measures adopted in V4 countries and the EU to mitigate the impact of the global economic crisis, to discuss attitudes which individual countries

⁵² MUSILOVÁ, M., TURČAN, V.: *Rímske pamiatky na strednom Dunaji. Nadácia pre záchranu kultúrneho dedičstva*, Bratislava 2010.

⁵³ http://www.culture.gov.sk/uploads/33/a0/33a03f85993e4cc36834c61d9c988b27/sk_pk_final_eurovkm_komunikac-bratislava-2011.pdf

⁵⁴ <http://www.buongiornoslovacchia.sk/index.php/archives/15137>

had adopted in the area of regulation of relations between employers and employees in an effort to maintain the employment and to re-start the interest of employers to hire people for vacancies (Labour Codes and other legislation).

Between 30 September – 1 October 2010 Slovakia hosted a *meeting of the V4 Speakers of Parliaments*. The leading topic of the meeting was “*Social inclusion of the Roma*”. The aim of the meeting of the Speakers of the V4 parliaments was to exchange information and experience on dealing with the issue of the Roma in their countries.

*The integration problems of Roma communities dominated at the V4 Presidents meeting on November 5 - 7 2011 in Karlovy Vary. They agreed that none of the V4 is able to face that problem only with its own forces – they invited for European solutions*⁵⁵.

V4 and Development Assistance

On 1 April 2011 a *Conference of the V4 Finance Ministries and Foreign Affairs Ministries* was held, focused on the issue of *providing the Official Development Assistance (ODA)*. The discussed areas covered the division of labour and competencies in ODA between the V4 Foreign Affairs Ministries and Finance Ministries, cooperation when negotiating the EU’s multi-annual financial framework for 2014-2020, experience with ‘trust funds’ management as well as geographic priorities of the V4 countries, with the aim to identify countries which may potentially cooperate with V4. At the same time, it was criticized that the evaluation and the monitoring of development assistance project were de facto nonexistent, and a serious programming on the spot was missing. The V4 Foreign Affairs Ministries and Finance Ministries agreed on further steps to be taken when performing their joint projects in their partnership countries of priority (Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership) and adopted a joint communiqué. Its particular outcome will be a joint V4 project carried out in the area of developmental cooperation, while *Moldova was determined as a territorial priority*.⁵⁶

International Visegrad Fund

The main target of the IVF activities is to support the Visegrad identity, fellowship and relations within the civic society, the development of regional cooperation and exchanges by means of joint cultural, artistic, scientific, research and educational projects, exchanges of artists and young people, supporting the cross-border cooperation and the tourism development. It covers e.g. *Visegrad Scholarship Programme* or *Visegrad strategic programme* and a grant system. In 2010 the VIF was 6 million EUR.

⁵⁵ STRÁŽAY, T.: ... 2011

⁵⁶ Annual Implementation Report of the Programme of the Presidency of the Slovak Republic in the Visegrad Group (1 July 2010 – 30 June 2011, *ibid*).

For more than 10 years of IVF's successful existence, it has helped to bring together citizens, V4's social and non-governmental organizations, including our neighbours and partners, and to enhance their mutual understanding. Thanks to its project tools and budget, the IVF has carried out more than 3,000 projects, granted more than 1,000 scholarships and supported the performance of 100 residential programmes of young V4 artists since it was established in June 2000.

Conclusions

The Central European grouping, the Visegrad Group, confirmed the justification of its existence, its functioning and of its importance for the future. It proved its potential for facing together more efficiently the actual international and global challenges in the fields of international affairs, economy, energy, security and other important spheres. It became a respected partner on the floor of the European Union, as well of other international organizations either with the European regional or a larger world impact.

The fact that the V4 is not institutionalised provides flexibility to this grouping, as well as fund saving by avoiding the respective administrative expenses. Its administration and coordination relies upon national coordinators, who usually are part of foreign affairs ministries of those countries. That is why there is a certain risk of certain coordination weakening in consequence of governmental and political changes.

The intensification of consultation processes within the V4 – for example, this year's summit in Bratislava – confirms the V4 tendency to find common positions in the basic questions of international and security policy. The Visegrad Group became a requested partner, "a brand name", in the international cooperation. In parallel with the already ongoing cooperation with close neighbours in frames of the Regional Partnership (born in 2001 from the Austrian initiative and puts together the V4 with Austria and Slovenia), the interregional cooperation with the countries of Benelux, Nordic Council and Baltic countries, in frames of Eastern Partnership (including the regional association GUAM – Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldavia), or with the West Balkan countries, the interest for cooperation is being manifested also by Japan, Korea, Canada, Egypt, or the Mercosur^{57,58}. Consequently, the Visegrad Group has a valuable and promising prospects on the world scene.

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⁵⁷ MELLER, S.: The Visegrad Group – a look in the the future. In: JAGODZINSKI, A., *ibid*, p. 231.

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