

PROGRAMME OF THE SLOVAK PRESIDENCY OF THE VISEGRAD GROUP (JULY 2014 – JUNE 2015)



SLOVAK PRESIDENCY
2014/2015 OF THE VISEGRAD GROUP

∴ DYNAMIC VISEGRAD

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OF THE SLOVAK PRESIDENCY
OF THE VISEGRAD GROUP
July 2014 – June 2015**

“DYNAMIC VISEGRAD FOR EUROPE AND BEYOND”



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1. MAIN PRIORITY AREAS OF THE SLOVAK V4 PRESIDENCY

In 2014 the V4 countries commemorate the 25th anniversary of the fundamental changes that took place in the region and the fall of the Iron Curtain. They recently celebrated the 10th anniversary of their accession to the European Union and the round anniversaries of NATO membership which laid down the foundation of international security.

The V4 countries enter second decade of their membership in the EU as successful Member States with increased self-confidence earned through their dynamic development and relatively stable economic results achieved in the preceding period. The Visegrad Group countries' achievements are seen as a successful model of economic transformation, a positive example for other states undertaking reforms as well as the success of the EU enlargement policy. The economic growth of the V4 countries over the past 15 to 20 years has exceeded the EU average. Over the years the V4 as a whole has recorded a successful shift from the periphery towards the very core of European integration. It is crucial for the V4 countries to remain at the centre of the European integration process and maintain an active influence on European policies.

The Slovak Presidency shall pay particular attention to continuity in the implementation of priority initiatives within the framework of strategic goals laid down during the previous Presidencies.

In the area of energy security the V4 countries put emphasis on building and modernizing transmission infrastructure in the field of North-South gas and electricity interconnections, overcoming unilateral dependence on imported energy carriers (gas and oil) and the completion of the EU single energy market as a key element of the EU climate and energy policy. The Slovak Presidency will also pay close attention to the regional dimension of security of gas supplies. In this context, the V4 countries support the idea to proceed towards elaboration of joint Preventive Action Plans and Emergency Plans also at regional level.

Continued attention shall be devoted to the on-going construction of missing transport connections, especially developing the North-South axis and the building of an integrated transport system between the countries of the Central European region, and development of the North-South connectivity, on which the intensification of trade, tourism, an influx of foreign investment and the competitiveness of the region as a whole are largely dependent. We welcome the establishment of the High Level Working Group (HLWG) on transport connections between the Visegrad Group countries. The HLWG will continue its work during the Slovak Presidency with the aim to effectively implement the V4 Ministerial Conclusions, signed in Budapest on 27 November 2013.

In the road transport area particular attention shall be paid to the provision of services in the international transport of goods with a view to ensuring a common V4 approach to any changes or improvements fostering the functioning of the common market.

Furthermore, V4 countries shall pay attention to solving the problem of the bottlenecks in Central Europe. It is also important to promote the idea of sustainable transport and developing a network of hubs which will combine road, rail, inland waterway and air transport.

With regard to defence cooperation the Slovak Presidency shall oversee the final phase of the V4 Battlegroup preparation and continue the search for opportunities to effectively leverage joint capabilities beyond the 1st half of 2016 when the Battlegroup is on standby. In this context we will also support long-term strategic cooperation between the V4 countries and the implementation of the projects that have been launched under the previous Presidencies.

The Slovak Presidency shall closely coordinate positions with partners in the area of the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU. The V4 countries share similar views on the need to improve the existing mechanisms, especially in the field of resolving crisis situations around the world. Particular attention will be paid to security situation developing in our vicinity. The continued support of the V4 for the enlargement process and maintaining the open nature of the EU will be emphasized as well.

The current dramatic developments in our closest Eastern neighbourhood underline the importance of solidarity and close coordination of foreign policy and security matters within the Visegrad Group. Recent developments in the vicinity of the V4 have affected the validity of our security environment in a negative and destabilizing way and put into focus principles on which peace in Europe is based on. Therefore, V4 countries should devote higher attention to analysing and exchanging information on key regional security matters in the V4 neighbourhood (military presence and activities in the EaP, Baltic and the Black Sea regions). The V4 countries have clearly expressed their position on the root causes of the on-going crisis in Ukraine and continue to underline their support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and are ready to support Ukraine in its pursuit of necessary reforms.

The Slovak Presidency shall place particular importance on continuing the political dialogue with the countries of the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership which the V4 holds regularly as the only European regional grouping. The V4 endeavours to provide political assistance as well as project-oriented support (via the International Visegrad Fund) to both regions in order to promote their Euro-Atlantic integration, to strengthen the local civil society and to foster regional cooperation.

The Slovak Presidency intends to further promote the reinforcement of the dynamics and competitiveness of the V4 region as an integral part of the Visegrad cooperation. In this respect, the V4 countries should focus on the new climate and energy policy framework; support for economic growth by implementing pro-growth measures, including the use of EU structural funds; consolidating public finances; promoting digital agenda and combating tax evasion. Innovative financing could become one of important tools to bolster economies in the region. Funds from the CEF (Connecting Europe Facility) used on projects of common interest in energy, transport and modernizing regional infrastructure represent a unique instrument for supporting economic development. Our common objective shall be to implement policies supporting the implementation of technological and social innovations in line with efforts to rise the competitiveness of the region. Likewise, we shall strive to create space for the exchange of experience and best practices in order to achieve synergistic effects for economic growth and increasing employment in the V4 countries.

The 2030 policy framework for climate and energy will be one of the key issues negotiated at EU level during the Slovak Presidency. The Prime Ministers of the V4 countries have recently underlined the sovereign right of every country to freely choose its most suitable energy mix. Each state should retain primary responsibility over areas such as nuclear power generation or the use of conventional and unconventional energy sources, including renewables. The V4 countries shall continue intensive coordination of their positions (with possible common lines) in order to have a solution on agreement that reflects the needs and circumstances of the region taking into account the possible negative impacts on competitiveness, the pace of international climate negotiations, environmental sustainability and stability of the energy sector. The agreement must ensure a fair effort sharing between Member States and relevant mechanisms to compensate excessive costs borne by V4 countries.

The Slovak Presidency has also interest in strengthening mutual communication and exchanging experience between the V4 countries in the area of the Cohesion Policy with emphasis on preparation and implementation of Operational Programmes in the next programming period 2014 – 2020.

In the area of taxation the Slovak Presidency shall engage in completing the exchange of information between the V4 countries on new trends and forms of tax evasion, in particular in relation to the value added tax, with the goal of effectively eliminating tax fraud in the region.

Among cross-cutting topics, the Slovak Presidency shall also focus on the digital agenda, which is currently experiencing its most dynamic growth and enjoying support at European level, as it also opens up new opportunities for developing cooperation in

the “V4+” format. The Slovak Presidency shall also follow up on activities in support of science, research and innovation, in line with the ministerial declaration from December 2013 as well as joint efforts in the field of education with the emphasis on dual vocational and training education system.

Taking action in a unified manner externally whenever possible is in the interests of the V4 countries as most European and global partners often perceive us as a single region. With respect to the V4’s external activities, we shall rely on the proven “V4+” format of cooperation and focus on enhancing existing partnerships and identifying potential new partners representing specific qualities and bringing opportunities for real added value from the perspective of V4 countries. In this context special attention will be focused on issues pertaining to the European agenda and regional cooperation.

Regular dialogue between the legislative bodies of V4 countries has proven to be a real added value to the mainly inter-governmental nature of V4 cooperation. Conclusions from the meeting of the Speakers of the Visegrad Group Parliaments in Budapest (February 2014) outlined possible new ways of deepening the V4 parliamentary dimension. The Slovak Presidency shall promote greater involvement of national parliaments in EU policy-making. Selected parliamentary committees will continue their exchange of views on topical EU, foreign policy and regional issues.

The time frame of the Slovak Presidency includes significant international anniversaries which we intend to commemorate in a dignified manner with our partners: the 10th anniversary of the accession of the V4 countries into the EU (2004 – 2014), the 25th anniversary of the democratic change in Central Europe (1989 – 2014) as well as other anniversaries with common historical parallels for our region (events connected with World War I and II, etc.). In May 2014, 15 years passed since the adoption of the so-called Bratislava Declaration which for the first time outlined the contents and mechanisms of Visegrad cooperation (the document adopted at the meeting of V4 Prime Ministers in Bratislava on 14 May 1999). It is of utmost importance to collect and preserve for future generations the testimonies of witnesses from the V4 countries of the historic developments in the V4 inter alia highlighting cooperation between political dissidents as a prelude to the later Visegrad cooperation and show the connection between the changes in the V4 countries.

The Slovak Presidency is focused on strengthening the civic dimension of Visegrad cooperation. Closer cooperation between public television and radio broadcasters across the V4 countries could result in increasing the awareness of the general public of pertinent matters and current challenges as well as of our cultural heritage and historical ties. To this end, cooperation agreements previously concluded at a bilateral level will be presented as examples of good practices. The Slovak Presidency shall support V4

activities in the area of public diplomacy and communication strategy with the objective of promoting the Visegrad “brand” internally and outside the borders of the V4. The cycling federations of the V4 countries are committed to continue the organization of the annual Visegrad Bicycle Race in line with the new concept of the race introduced recently.

The Slovak Presidency shall promote implementation of selected activities by non-governmental organizations of V4 countries. Co-operation between V4 NGO’s across the borders would be welcomed. The synergistic effect of such cooperation may deliver greater visibility for the Visegrad Group in the larger public. The Slovak Presidency will promote continuation of the already well-established regional platforms, such as GLOBSEC and Tatra Summit conferences, with a view to highlighting common approaches of the Visegrad countries to topical European and security policy issues.

The Slovak Presidency shall support the project-based activities of the International Visegrad Fund (IVF). National contributions to the IVF amounting to €8 million as of 2014 provide additional space in order to strengthen internal cohesion and support Visegrad civic participation. The IVF shall devote increased attention to specific programs designed for the countries of the Eastern Partnership and the Western Balkans (“V4EaP” and “Visegrad+”) with the aim to support reform processes and building civil society in these countries. The governments of V4 countries can provide support to the leadership of the IVF by stepping up their efforts to secure additional funding from external donors.

2. EUROPEAN AFFAIRS

2.1. Institutional and political framework

The Slovak Presidency shall endeavour to make a further qualitative shift in coordinating the positions of the V4 countries on priority issues within the European agenda. We will convene regular consultations and systematic meetings of Prime Ministers, Ministers of Foreign Affairs and State Secretaries for European affairs in advance of all meetings of the European Council, the General Affairs Council and the Foreign Affairs Council.

Another priority of the Slovak Presidency shall be the strengthening of relations with European institutions in conjunction with the results of the elections to the European parliament (held in May 2014) and the subsequent personal nominations to the leading positions in the EU and formation of a new European Commission and European Parliament. With the arrival of a new legislative term for the European Parliament and the European Commission, it would be appropriate for the V4 countries to emphasize a common approach in promoting V4 relations with the new leading representatives of the

EU institutions. It is highly probable that the coming years shall bring about a redefinition of inter-institutional relations. Forming of a new European Commission in the second half of 2014 would appear a suitable opportunity for initialising dialogue and for organizing a V4 high-level meeting (or in the V4+ format) involving the Prime Ministers with the new President of the European Commission and/or the European Council.

The Slovak Presidency submits proposals with the objective of further strengthening the coordination of the V4 countries in the preparation of joint positions and commentaries to the proposed objectives of the European Council. In this context we will build on the “EU Priority List” initiative of the Hungarian Presidency of the V4, which amounts to an undisputed headway in the search for common ground between the V4 countries in the individual sector agendas.

Following the conclusions adopted at the meeting of the European Affairs Committees of the V4 Parliaments (April 2014) Slovak Presidency shall support intensive dialogue between the national parliaments of the V4 countries on EU issues. It is important to improve the quality of exchange of opinions between the members of national parliaments on European themes. We will consider the possibility to initiate closer cooperation between MEPs selected from V4 countries in connection with the re-constitution of the European Parliament.

The Slovak Presidency proposes focusing the attention of the V4 countries, inter alia, on the process of reforms and strengthening democratic legitimacy. Although confidence in EU institutions according to Eurobarometer research has been relatively high in all V4 countries, however this trend has been decreasing over the long-term in the EU as a whole (according to the Eurobarometer from a value of 43 % in the autumn of 2010 to 31 % in the spring of 2013). Strengthening the democratic legitimacy and accountability of EU institutions, as well as bringing EU closer to its citizens can help to reduce the democratic deficit as a persistent issue of the European integration.

V4 countries could focus on issues related to strengthening the legitimacy of EU decisions, while safeguarding the institutional balance and the roles of the national parliaments of the Member States. V4 countries could also contribute to defining a concept for Central Europe in this area. This has the potential to become an encompassing and common theme for all V4 countries as all are faced with low levels of civic participation in elections to the European Parliament over the long-term.

The Slovak Republic may also offer to the V4 partners its experience in the form of the National Convention on the European Union, a platform successfully functioning under local conditions in the Slovak Republic. A similar platform for professional and public debate on key European themes could be considered at V4 level as well.

Proposed activities:

- Meeting of State Secretaries responsible for European affairs, September 2014;
- Consultations between director generals responsible for European affairs in the V4 + Austria, Croatia and Slovenia format;
- Strengthening mutual consultations of the V4 countries in the area of institutional relations of the EU, for instance by initiating a V4 Convention on the EU.

2.2. Cohesion Policy

In the new programming period 2014 – 2020, the European Cohesion Policy will be focused on meeting the targets of the Europe 2020 Strategy in order to stimulate economic growth and new jobs creation. Sound regional investments for key economic sectors, tackling climate change and energy dependency, poverty reduction, elimination of social exclusion and raising the level of education will be key issues. Results- and performance-oriented action with regard to utilization of the European structural and investment funds will be emphasized. The Slovak Presidency will focus on practical implementation of the new elements of the European Cohesion Policy, such as application of ex-ante conditionality, performance framework and reduction of administrative burdens.

Another important area for V4 discussions will be to exchange experience on reducing regional disparities, including strategies how to make use of the potential of European regions, in particular with regard to the use of integrated instruments.

With a view to possible enlargement of cooperation in the field of the Cohesion Policy, discussions will be also held in the V4 + Slovenia and Croatia format.

Proposed activities:

- Informal meeting of Government members responsible for Cohesion Policy of the V4 countries, Slovenia and Croatia, 2015.

3. COMPETITIVENESS, FINANCE AND ECONOMY

3.1. Digital Agenda

One of the priorities of the Slovak Presidency is the development of specific activities in the area of the digital agenda, which has recently grown in significance and importance, specifically:

- The digital economy as a phenomenon of comparative advantage to the V4 region;
- The area of cyber security.

The term digital economy as the driving force of the economic development is coming more to the forefront at national and international level as it represents a prospective sector of the economy with tremendous potential for growth. The theme of the digital agenda, investment into information and communication technologies (ICT) and innovation belongs to the priority areas of the political EU strategy - Europe 2020.

The digital economy may become phenomena of comparative advantage for the V4 region and the impulse for the creation of jobs, development of new businesses in the region and a resurgence of economic growth with focus on *e-skills for jobs* and support for *start-ups*. Potential opportunities exist in the use of the digital economy to resolve youth unemployment.

Accordingly, we will place emphasis on spreading awareness of the positive impacts of the digital economy on economic growth, employment and society.

We will focus on emphasizing the current attractiveness of the V4 region in terms of professional skills and ICT expertise as well as other potential advantages offered by the region. We seek to give priority attention to the support for start-ups and innovative companies and attracting foreign capital into our region.

The Slovak Presidency also envisages closer cooperation between relevant institutions of the V4 countries in enforcing intellectual property rights with special focus on violations of intellectual property rights in the digital environment of the Internet and on the exchange of information and good practices.

Moreover, our common goal is to complete the Digital Single Market with clear rules for society, entrepreneurs and public authorities.

Proposed activities:

- Coordination of the “*eSkills week 2014*” European Commission campaign to support ICT in the conditions of the V4 countries. The results of skills testing from the area of

IT shall be presented at the IT Summit conference involving representatives of the V4 countries, October 2014;

- “The School Dance 2014” competition for primary and secondary schools with the objective of developing skills in information and communication technologies.

3.1.1. Information/Cyber Security

The growth of the digital economy in the conditions of the V4 countries also depends on the harmonization of measures and the implementation of joint projects in the area of network and information security. The primary objective is to increase the immunity of information systems in the V4 countries against cyber-attacks and to decrease computer-based crime. A widely adopted standard at EU level is needed within the area of data protection, which would then allow V4 countries to derive related specific measures with an impact on information society. From a legislative perspective, we want to direct cooperation towards the exchange of information and *best practices* from the V4 environment on preparing standards in the area of information and network security. In terms of data protection we also tend to focus cooperation on exchanging views, primarily at the legislative level (national law on data protection, especially in the area of biometrics, explicit consent in the Internet environment, etc.).

The Slovak Presidency focuses on:

- Streamlining management of information/cyber security, security risk management;
- Protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms in connection with the use of information and communication infrastructure (including the Internet);
- Increasing awareness and competencies, education in the area of information/cyber security;
- Cooperation at international level in the area of information/cyber security (exchanging skills, experience and sharing information);
 - Completing mutual consultations in order to harmonize the approaches taken by V4 countries and considering mutual support when adopting decisions and their subsequent implementation within international organizations (EU, NATO, UN and others);
 - Supporting an improvement in the standing of the Central European Cyber Security Platform;
 - Creating a safe environment (prevention, response to security incidents, the scope of specialized CSIRT/CERT-type teams, for example the implementation of joint simulation exercises on critical information infrastructure protection, creating a secure communication channel to share information on current threats and on-going large-scale security incidents, linking of early warning and information sharing in the V4.

3.2. Industrial Policy and the Internal Market

During the period of the Slovak Presidency the European Council will debate industrial policy and supporting measures to preserve the competitiveness of industry in the EU. The conclusions of the European Council should reflect support measures to resolve the problem of high energy prices, the introduction of environmental standards in a cost effective manner, accounting for global competition and the existence of actually available technologies in an adequate time frame required for profitability and a relatively high return on investment for industry in a relatively short period of time. Otherwise the progressive transfer of production outside the EU would become a real threat and the objective of a 20 % share of industrial production in GDP by 2020 would not be achieved. The Slovak Presidency shall coordinate the V4 position on the European Council's conclusions on industrial policy which should respect specific needs of the region.

The steel industry has a strong standing in the V4 countries and forms the foundation for the development and creation of value in many key industrial sectors including construction works, car industry, mechanical engineering and energy.

The Visegrad Group has interest in this regard in preserving the competitiveness of industrial production and shall focus on the following in particular:

- Synchronization of the EU policy influencing industrial competitiveness with emphasis on synergizing aspects of trade and energy and climate policy with industrial policy,
 - Searching for common positions using the V4+ format for the purposes of effectively promoting positions within the Council of the European Union;
- Ensuring the competitiveness of industry in terms of secure and cost-effective deliveries of energy when realizing the goals in the context climate and energy policy,
 - An important aspect is the need to decrease the negative impacts of support schemes for renewable energy resources on the energy costs of industry so that these instruments also take into account technological advances and maturity with a concurrent decrease in production costs,
 - It is necessary to minimise the increase of final energy prices and to ensure stable deliveries of energy and materials for industry at reasonable prices. This is a short-term to medium-term priority based on the need to assure the efficiency of chains of supplier - customer relationships. Energy-intensive sectors including the production of steel should continue to have a place in European industry; their relocation would not benefit EU competitiveness, particularly in a period in which the economy is just recovering from an extended recession. Eventual relocation would seriously damage economic recovery;
- Supporting cooperation in the area of innovations with the use of instruments of Community programmes, macro-regional strategies and initiatives in the area of trans-European infrastructure,

- A common approach towards finding a way for supporting enterprise-based innovations, tax benefits for expenditure on research and development and their exemption from austerity measures within fiscal consolidation;
- Support for the assurance of qualified labour force pursuant to the EU policy for industrial competitiveness,
 - Finding common ground in matching the needs of the labour market and organization in education systems, including the creation of stimuli for cooperation between education and the private sector.

Within the EU Single Market, the V4 may focus on the sector of services that has undergone tremendous changes recently (following the approval of EU Directive No 2006/123/EC). Freedom to provide services and their free movement within the EU support the travel of service providers to other Member States and the provision of services in them. Given the various excessive restrictions and conditions for providing services that remain in practice in the EU, the process of simplifying the rules should continue.

Another area of interest is the digitalisation of commerce and payments and the exchange of experience in these areas. A more serious step would be the introduction of interoperability of information systems within the EU and the use of electronic means of communication related to business activities. Therefore, we recommend the exchange of experience in this area.

The Slovak Presidency shall initiate the following action steps:

- Evaluating and, if necessary, simplifying the requirements for the provision of services of a commercial nature that are considered to offer greatest benefit towards the integration of the Single Market;
- Disclosing essential information and registers related to the business environment on the websites of relevant government authorities;
- Supporting cross-border electronic trade, including e-payments (fees for administrative costs) in public administration;
- Interoperability of information systems within the EU and the use of electronic means of communication in areas related to business activities.

Meetings between V4 experts for the areas of services or in the field of e-commerce and e-payments could be initiated during the Slovak Presidency.

3.2.1. Industrial Property Protection

The interests of V4 countries are nearly identical as regards the revision of the Community Trade Mark Regulation and the revision of the Directive to approximate the

laws of the Member States relating to trade marks. The package of initiatives proposed by the European Commission in March 2013 aims to simplify and modernize current legislation so that the trade mark registration system across the entire European Union is more efficient and more accessible for businesses, both in terms of reducing costs and complexity, increasing speed, improving predictability and legal certainty. The Slovak Presidency shall stimulate closer cooperation and discussion among relevant institutions of the V4 countries with the aim to achieve common goals. The Slovak Presidency shall coordinate the discussion and co-operation among the V4 countries on a possible creation of a joint regional Patent Institute which shall act as an International Searching Authority and International Preliminary Examining Authority within the meaning of the PCT. In the upcoming period, V4 countries are expected to achieve decisive progress in this area.

3.3. Finance

The main priorities of the Slovak Presidency shall be combating tax fraud and tax evasion and policies to support economic growth.

Economic growth can be encouraged by supporting investment, both directly and indirectly, by implementing structural changes with a long-term effect on the economy. Whereas EU economies are largely highly interconnected, coordinated action within the structural policies of the V4 region may deliver effective results. The V4 countries can take inspiration from the examples provided by other successful countries.

In relation to pro-growth measures, the Slovak Presidency shall concentrate on:

- Exchanging experience in the area of structural measures focused on the labour market;
- Exchanging experience in the area of structural measures focused on education;
- Discussion on the search for new methods to support investment.

Proposed activities:

The Slovak Presidency shall initiate events at the level of Ministers and State Secretaries between finance departments with focus on:

- Pro-growth measures, 2nd half of 2014;
- Cooperation on taxation and combating tax evasion, 1st half of 2015;

3.3.1. Innovative Financial Instruments

The Slovak Presidency in the V4 shall facilitate the mutual exchange of experience between countries on the proposal and implementation of innovative financing.

The Slovak Republic has introduced the use of innovative financing in the interests of supporting domestic sources of economic growth. The Slovak Republic has created the innovative *Slovak Investment Holding* (SIH) fund in the area of pro-growth measures to support long-term investment from European funds. Given that the SIH shall provide refundable financial aid and provides an opportunity for the private sector to participate in its projects, these resources shall be used in a more effective and broader manner. Last but not least, the SIH activities shall be classified outside of public sector accounts, thereby providing financial stimulus for economic growth without any negative impacts on the consolidation of public finances.

3.3.2. Taxes and Customs

Tax fraud and tax evasion are problems in Europe and worldwide and result in shortfalls of budget revenues. The Slovak Presidency focuses on exchanging knowledge and experience between V4 countries on combating tax fraud in the field of value added and income taxation within the international context.

At the same time we shall strive to intensify communication among customs administrations in the V4 countries to combat tax evasion and customs fraud.

The Slovak Presidency shall focus its attention on:

- Exchanging information between the V4 countries on new trends in tax fraud, in particular concerning best practices in combating value added tax fraud with the subsequent use of such information with aim to support of:
 - Detecting domestic fraud,
 - Detecting carousel fraud (primarily between neighbouring Member States),
 - Initiating multilateral controls (tax audits carried out simultaneously in different Member States);
- Exchanging experience in the area of transfer pricing;
- Online interconnection to financial authorities when using electronic cash registers;
- Transparency and exchange of tax information;
- Preventing tax fraud involving goods released into free circulation with VAT exemption due to delivery to another Member State (Custom procedure 4200);
- Enhancing cooperation in the preparation and adoption of joint measures to eliminate the phenomenon of the undervalued price of textile goods imported from China and

other Asian countries (exchange of data obtained through internal activities and from external resources and defining common practices within the V4)¹;

- Improving and speeding up the exchange of information on customs issues pursuant to Council Regulation (EC) No 515/97 of 13 March 1997 on mutual assistance between the administrative authorities of the Member States and cooperation between the administrative authorities of the Member States and the Commission to ensure the correct application of the law on customs and agricultural matters.

3.3.3. Cooperation on International Treaties on the Promotion and Reciprocal Protection of investments

The Slovak Presidency shall coordinate the cooperation of the V4 countries with the objective of achieving sustainable development in investment policy as follows:

- In the area of future investment policies, in particular, common positions towards the Council of the EU TPC (*Trade Policy Committee*) in relation to future trade agreements, i.e. FTA (*Free Trade Agreements*), the ISDS (*Investor State Disputes Settlements*) arbitration mechanism and separate agreements, as well as other matters relating to common trade policy;
- In relation to other meetings related to the protection of investments, such as the investment meeting of the OECD and the meeting of UNICITRAL Working Group II (currently focused on a draft convention on the application of transparency rules);
- With respect to bilateral investment treaties concluded between EU Member States, their validity and applicability pursuant to EU law (i.e. the issue of “intra EU BIT”).

The investment treaties concluded on EU level should be balanced, on one hand preserving the right of the state to regulate and on the other hand protecting real investors, while excluding frivolous and parallel claims. The Investment treaties should follow Investment Policy Framework for Sustainable Development by UNCTAD and OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises.

3.3.4. Financial Market

The Slovak Presidency focuses on cooperation in the area of officially supported export credits, specifically:

- Consultation on the approach taken by the V4 countries towards open issues within officially supported export credits and in the case of equal access, forming and promoting a common unified position at the EU, as well as at the OECD;
- In the area of combating corruption involving officially supported export credits pursuant to OECD Council Recommendation on Bribery and Officially Supported Export Credits;

¹ The Slovak Republic initiated the definition of a common methodology for determining the customs value of the above-mentioned textile goods from Asia.

- Due Diligence Process within officially supported export credits and environmental and social impacts (Recommendation of the Council on Common Approaches for Officially Supported Export Credits and Environmental and Social Due Diligence).

3.4. Science, Research and Innovation

Attention in the area of international scientific cooperation shall be focused on continuing projects and programmes initiated within the Visegrad Group and the V4+ format. In addition to intensifying cooperation within the European Research Area (V4 Ministerial Declaration on Cooperation in the European Research Area - ERA adopted in Budapest in December 2013), the objective is to develop cooperation with non-EU countries. A joint programme of cooperation between the Japan Science and Technology Agency, the International Visegrad Fund and competent authorities in the V4 countries is under preparation in the context of long-term scientific and technical cooperation with Japan.

The Slovak Presidency focuses on the following in science and technology:

- Coordinating the efforts of the V4 countries in implementing European and international programmes and initiatives in the area of research and development such as Horizon 2020 and the Danube Strategy within the national frameworks of the individual countries,
 - Cooperation of V4 countries on the fulfilment of joint priorities within the ERA. Coordinating joint supporting activities to increase the participation of the V4 countries in EU programmes and initiatives of Horizon 2020, the Danube Strategy, EIT, ESFRI and ALLEGRO,
 - Cooperation of the V4 countries on the development of research infrastructure at national and EU level, the implementation of national roadmaps for research infrastructure, including ESFRI,
 - Harmonization of existing and the creation of new major scientific infrastructure to provide an effective platform towards achieving excellence and an area of potential synergy between Horizon 2020 and Cohesion Policy measures,
 - Coordination of joint activities with Horizon 2020 supporting structures, activities to engage partners in Horizon 2020 and the opportunity to interconnect and cooperate with Liaison Offices for research and development in the V4 countries,
 - Creation and implementation of EU Danube Strategy projects with the focus on the development of a knowledge-based society through research, education and information technologies. Subject of common interest could include in particular social inclusion for the marginalized Roma community and dual education,
 - Developing activities to integrate European Commission instruments for expanding participation in Horizon 2020 (JRC, ICPDR, ERA Chairs, Twinning, Teaming) as well as other programmes and initiatives related to Horizon 2020

- (Eurostars2, Empir2, Ecsel, ERANet) in particular when engaged in the next wave of knowledge and innovation communities (KIC) of the European Institute of Technology (EIT);
- Closer cooperation between the V4 countries within international organizations and European initiatives,
 - Cooperation within participation in international and European centres and initiatives of research and development such as CERN, SJV DUBNA, XFEL, ESRF, ILL, EUREKA, EGI, COST, MOBILITY and others;
 - Support and development of the V4+ format of cooperation between the V4 countries and third countries,
 - Research and development projects supporting cooperation between workplaces in the V4 countries and China focused on co-financing joint projects of scientific and technical cooperation and funding the mobility of research and development staff,
 - Preparation of calls for funding joint research projects (not just bilateral cooperation projects - financing mobility) focused on science and technology priorities. Directing calls on material research and nanotechnologies - new materials, surface treatments and system diagnostics for applications in the areas of economic specialization, specifically the car and aviation industry, mechanical engineering, electrical engineering, electronics, metallurgy and energy,
 - Joint research projects with Israel, Turkey, Japan and eventually the USA on the basis of the multilateral V4 format;
 - Support for joint research projects within the V4 and V4+;
 - Support for cross-border mobility of doctoral students and scientists within the V4 and V4+ countries.

Innovations are considered to be a key instrument for economic growth and sustaining competitiveness around the world. The development of innovations should secure jobs and improve the position of the V4 countries. In the area of support for innovations the Slovak Presidency will primarily focus on the following:

- Maintaining industrial production;
- Re-focusing research from supply-oriented to demand-oriented and research in companies;
- Innovations in companies, not just technological but also non-technological, and a relevant and qualified labour force reflecting the needs of the market.

The Slovak Presidency has an interest in cooperating with other V4 countries in implementing strategies for intelligent specialization in areas such as:

- The globalization of small and medium enterprises;
- Cross-border partnership/networking of research, academic institutions and business entities;

- Labour force mobility within these sectors;
- Support for integration into foreign supply chains.

We also see room for enhancing cooperation and consultation between the Danube region and the Baltic regions through the exchange of experience gained from the implementation of macro-regional strategies (EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region and Danube Strategy) with the objective of supporting innovation in small and medium enterprises, developing a knowledge-based society (research, education and ICT), supporting the competitiveness of enterprises, investments into human resources and skills as well as environmental protection.

Proposed activities:

- V4+USA round table involving V4 ministers/representatives responsible for science and research and competent representatives of the USA - exchange of information, positions, proposal of specific forms of implementing cooperation, verifying opportunities to conduct joint projects in specific areas of bilateral interest, October/November 2014;
- V4+China - Seminar on Science and Technology. The Seminar will provide opportunities for government officials, experts and managers in the field of science, innovation and technology cooperation and international technology transfer to develop mutually beneficial relationships and to exchange knowledge and ideas, 1st half of 2015.

3.5. Regional Development

A change has occurred in functioning of the state administration consisting of a shift from a more or less passive transfer of funding from the state level to the sub-state, regional or local level, as well as towards an active strategy of joint investment into regional economies in the interests of preserving and increasing the standard of living and incomes of residents on the basis of the full exploitation of local economic potential in all regions of the V4 Member States and neighbouring regions.

The development of cross-border cooperation is of immense importance for the European cohesion, stability and integration and is able to stimulate important social and economic priorities and long-term sustainable growth and competitiveness of the V4 countries.

Within the area of regional development, the Slovak Presidency will focus inter alia on the following:

- Cross-border cooperation within the coordination of the activities of *Regional*

- Development Agencies* (RDA) included in the Integrated Network of Regional RDAs. In addition to completing the implementation and assessment of projects from Operational Programme Cross-Border Cooperation (2007-2013), work will also continue on preparing new projects for the 2014 - 2020 period. The strategy of cross-border cooperation with partners will be defined in the upcoming financial period with respect to the following thematic objectives: enhancing the competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises, environmental protection and promoting the sustainable use of resources, promoting sustainable transport and removing bottlenecks in key network infrastructures, promoting employment and supporting labour mobility, increasing institutional capacities and ensuring the efficiency of public administration focused on tourism development, protection of cultural heritage and traditions, crafts, creation of infrastructure, renewable energy as well as cooperation in the area of education and social inclusion;
- Cooperation within the coordination of the activities of the *Euroregion Associations* (EA) and the *European Grouping of Territorial Co-operation* (EGTC), which significantly contribute to removing obstacles to cross-border cooperation, creating good neighbourly relations, solving common social and economic problems and uniting people on both sides of national borders aimed at taking advantages of the EGTCs providing in the period of 2014 – 2020.

Proposed events:

- Meeting of State Secretaries for Regional Development on the topic of “A European Solution for the Carpathian Region in the Conditions of the V4+4 countries” (Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia and Ukraine), June 2015.
- Meeting of the Steering Group to the Common Urban Development Strategy of the V4 countries + Bulgaria, Romania, November 2014.

3.6. Tourism

During the Slovak Presidency shall continue the exchange of experience and the implementation of marketing and promotional activities in the area of tourism under the common “Discover Central Europe” brand. V4 countries will continue exchanging information on legislative changes in the area of tourism in the individual countries. Further steps for promoting V4 tourism shall commence after evaluating recent joint marketing and promotion of the V4 countries on the tourism markets of third countries.

The Slovak Presidency will concentrate on:

- Cooperation between national organizations for tourism in the V4 countries on the basis of the marketing plan for the given year and the creation of a unified image of the V4 countries as a tourism destination in Central Europe;

- Undertaking actions leading to enforcement of marketing activities in former Soviet Union countries, expanding the spectrum of promoted product groups (MICE products, UNESCO product, spa and health tourism);
- A common Internet presentation using the website European-quartet.com and other social media tools (facebook, weibo, twitter, etc.).

Proposed events:

- Meeting of national tourism (marketing) organizations experts, to prepare the marketing strategy and cooperation on V4 tourism, October 2014;
- Meeting of State Secretaries on „Future Perspectives of V4 Tourism“ connected with a conference on tourism quality, October 2014, and meeting of relevant ministries on the topic of the Carpathian Strategy;
- Meeting of national tourism organizations experts, to prepare the marketing strategy and cooperation on V4 tourism, February 2015;
- Meeting of State Secretaries and representatives of relevant ministries and national organizations for tourism on the topic of „Joint Marketing of V4 Countries in Remote Markets“, February/March 2015. The *Protocol on National Cooperation in Tourism between Ministries Responsible for Tourism in the V4 Countries* will be signed including common position to memorandum on cooperation with China.

3.7. Consumer Protection

The issue of consumer protection is currently one of the priority areas in the European Union. Above standard cooperation between the V4 countries takes place in areas such as the CPC (the system of cooperation between national authorities in the field of consumer protection). The positive results of mutual cooperation are, inter alia, jointly coordinated controls conducted by regulatory authorities of the V4 countries (Czech Trade Inspection, General Inspectorate for Consumer Protection in Hungary, the Polish Trade Inspection and the Slovak Trade Inspection) as well as specific projects implemented in collaboration with other EU Member States and with the European Commission.

In the context of the recently adopted legislation on consumer protection at EU level (Directive 2013/11/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council on alternative dispute resolution for consumer disputes and Regulation (EU) 524/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council on online dispute resolution for consumer disputes), the objective of which is to ensure that EU Member States operate quality out-of-court bodies to settle disputes between consumers and sellers, we have a special interest in intensifying cooperation with other V4 countries, which would include in particular the exchange of information on existing state systems of alternative dispute resolution

for consumer disputes and eventually the presentation of proposals for improving the current system of alternative dispute resolution.

New legislation was also submitted in 2013 by the European Commission (a draft Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council stipulating the rights of air transport passengers and another draft Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on package travel and assisted travel arrangements). These drafts shall significantly affect the standing of the consumer, what makes the Slovak Presidency interested in coordinating positions in negotiations concerning this draft EU legislation.

The Slovak Presidency focuses on:

- Creating common positions regarding the prepared EU legislation,
- Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on air transport passengers (cancelled and delayed flights, transporting passengers and their luggage);
- Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on package travel and assisted travel arrangements;
- Cooperation in the application of the Directive on alternative dispute resolution for consumer disputes (ADR);
- Exchanging information on the current status of the system for alternative dispute resolution for consumer disputes in V4 countries;
- Cooperation between control authorities in selected areas;
- Proposal of agreed working plans focused on preventing and stopping cross-border violations of laws concerning consumer interests;
- Improving awareness among consumers based on enhanced information exchange between control authorities;
- Intensifying cooperation on the basis of Regulation 2006/2004 on cooperation in the area of consumer protection (CPC);
- A unified consumer code as a tool for improving awareness and increasing the legal protection of consumers.

Proposed events:

- Meeting of V4 experts regarding an increase in the level of consumer protection;
 - Meeting of V4 experts regarding cooperation between control authorities;
 - Meeting of V4 experts on the transposition of the Directive on alternative dispute resolution (ADR), the application of the Regulation on online dispute resolution (ODR) and the Directive on consumer rights.
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4. DEFENCE AND SECURITY, JUSTICE AND HOME AFFAIRS

4.1. Defence and Security Policy

The Slovak Presidency supports the initiative to create a long-term vision for the security policy and defence cooperation of the V4 and intends to continue its implementation. The strategic reinforcement of defence cooperation in the V4 contributes to the preservation and development of the armed forces of all four countries and to more cost-effective defence for the region of Central Europe and security in European continent as a whole. The V4 shall also be able to make a higher quality contribution within NATO and the EU (both in civilian and military dimension) crisis management. Specifically we will focus on the successful completion of processes involved in the creation of a joint EU Battlegroup, the issue of regular joint training exercises and opening the discussion in respect of the joint protection of the airspace of the V4 countries.

We shall also continue to support and initiate the coordination of national positions with respect to NATO and the EU. This method of communication has proved its value over the years and made a major contribution towards promoting national as well as our joint priorities. It also contributes to better visibility of all four countries and presents a strong V4 region as an integral component of international organizations and multinational alliances. The V4 countries continue to adhere to their commitments defined in the joint declaration “Responsibility for a Strong NATO” adopted before Chicago summit (2012). With regard to the current new security challenges it is advisable that the V4 countries continue their close coordination with a view to adopting a common position at the forthcoming NATO summit in Wales (September 2014).

The Visegrad Group countries are ready to shoulder their share of responsibility for maintaining a coherent and effective NATO and resolved to promote regional and Euro-Atlantic security by strengthening our political commitment and enhancing defence capabilities.

Among the strategic priorities of the Slovak Presidency in the field of defence cooperation are efforts to enhance the interoperability of the armed forces of the V4 countries with the objective of more efficient cooperation in the future. We want to continue the exchange of defence planning professionals. The area of defence planning has been declared a priority in long-term perspective in a joint V4 document adopted recently. Regularly discussed joint procurement of armaments, equipment and materials for the armed forces as well as strengthening cooperation between the defence industries enterprises of the V4 countries are strictly related to this task.

The Slovak Presidency shall focus attention on pertinent security policy questions including assessment of the security situation in neighbouring areas, energy security, cyber security and defence against terrorism with the objective of identifying and supporting opportunities for regional cooperation in their resolution.

With regard to NATO enlargement one of long-term objective is the support of the V4 countries to the aspirant partners willing to meet membership criteria.

Another long-term objective is bringing Eastern Partnership and Western Balkans countries closer to the EU by supporting and promoting their participation in the EU Common Security and Defence Policy, which also represents an instrument contributing to their security system reform agenda.

Objective of the Slovak Presidency shall include finding opportunities for specific forms of regional cooperation within the NATO *Smart Defence*, *Connected Forces Initiative* and EU *Pooling & Sharing* initiatives.

The following are the objectives of the Slovak Presidency:

- Taking steps towards the fulfilment of V4 Prime Ministers tasking to V4 Ministers of Defence from October 2013:
 - Taking steps towards the fulfilment of a long-term vision and development of multi-year Action plan;
 - Continuing cooperation in the area of defence planning and the mutual exchange of professionals dealing with these issues,
 - Developing the strategy of joint training exercises and regular/annual „live“ training exercises involving all V4 countries, and subsequently its implementation;
- Continuing preparations for the creation of the joint V4 Battlegroup with combat readiness in the first half of 2016, and further exploring the possibility for linking the certification exercise with NATO high visibility exercise *Trident Juncture 2015*;
- Analysing and further studying opportunities for using the V4 Battlegroup as well as joint capabilities after 2016;
- Exploring opportunities for joint projects in military operations and international crisis management missions;
- Continuing the dialogue on security policy and defence issues on a political level,
- Preparation for the June 2015 European Council debate on CSDP;
- Developing cooperation in military education;
- Opening discussion on the topic of joint airspace defence and interoperability within the V4 countries;
- Strengthening the cooperation of defence industry enterprises in the V4 countries;
- Continuing the open exchange of information in the area of acquisition projects and identifying common areas in procurement and development plans with the final

objective of specific joint projects in the area of armaments;

- Continuing the process of creating more effective cooperation and coordinating tasks in the area of mutual acceptance of government quality assurance pursuant to the NATO STANAG 4107 standardization agreement;
- Cooperation in the area of cyber security and defence against terrorism;
- Continuing the cooperation between the military police in Slovakia, Poland and the Czech Republic in the *Multinational Military Police Battalion*, with emphasis on joint staff training and exercises.

Proposed events:

- Meeting of Defence Ministers, Spring 2015;
- Meeting of the political directors of the Ministries of Defence, Autumn 2014 and Spring 2015, in advance of the ministerial meeting;
- 2-day working seminar attended by the representatives of the Ministries of Defence of the V4 countries (at state secretary and expert levels) on the pertinent theme of mutual cooperation within the V4, during 2014;
- Meeting of the Senior body – high level group responsible for development of the long-term vision;
- Meeting between air force commanders;
- At least 1 expert group meeting on the formation of the V4 Battlegroup;
- Seminar of the V4 defence planning experts;
- Meeting of the V4 Planning Group;
- Meeting of the Chiefs of Staff;
- Meeting of national armaments directors, December 2014 and June 2015;
- Meeting of expert teams (expert group for system life cycles management and for the area of low-level air defence), October 2014 and April 2015;
- Seminar on cooperation between defence industry enterprises in the V4 countries, March 2015;
- Meeting of security authorities from the Ministries of Defence;
- Meetings at the level of Secretaries of Security Councils of the V4 countries, November 2014 and May 2015;
- Possible meeting of State Secretaries from Ministries of Defence and/or Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the V4 countries with their Ukrainian counterpart could be convened in order to assess the perspectives of military and security cooperation;
- Meeting at the level of Policy Directors of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs could be convened in order to continue security policy related dialogue;
- An educational course on reform of the security sector for experts from the V4 countries + countries of south-eastern Europe and/or the Eastern Partnership (following the model of the course arranged and hosted by the Slovak Republic during its previous V4 Presidency in June 2011 at Častá-Papiernička), 1st half of 2015;

- Meeting at the level of directors of security policy units regarding pertinent themes in the area of security and defence - on the occasion of the GLOBSEC conference.

4.2. Home Affairs

The V4 cooperation in the area of home affairs shall be complemented in the form of the expanded format of the Salzburg Forum (the Slovak Republic takes over the Presidency of the Salzburg Forum in the 1st half of 2014 and is organizing a ministerial conference in June 2014).

Cooperation between the police will be key priority area for the Slovak Presidency in the area of home affairs, particularly as regards the fight against organised crime (including inter alia human trafficking, corruption, drug trafficking, wildlife trafficking and environmental crime).

Given the rich experience of the V4 countries in the areas of public administration reform and bearing in mind the current on-going reforms in the Slovak Republic and in Hungary, active dialogue between the V4 countries represents a major step towards achieving their objectives in this field. Active cooperation between the Visegrad countries should focus on sharing experience with successfully completed public administration reforms as well as comparing the elements of reforms, which are currently in implementation.

Proposed events:

- Meeting of directors of border services of the V4 countries and the Ukraine;
- Expert meeting for the purposes to exchange information and experience with the focus on combating extremism, human and drug trafficking, as well as on criminal investigation and technical activities (possible participation of Ukraine);
- Meeting of director generals responsible for civil protection and crisis management with the emphasis on the issue of disasters caused by geo-physical changes (cave-ins and landslides);
- Tactical training exercises and competitions organized by the Fire and Rescue Corps (e.g. youth civil protection rescuers);
- International FIRECO conference, 1st half of 2015;
- Meeting of directors of asylum offices for the purposes of exchanging experience regarding issues related with implementing new EU legislation as well as other challenges in the area of the asylum system.

4.3. Justice

- The Slovak Presidency focuses on the following within the area of justice:
- Continuing V4+ cooperation in finding common positions on European prosecution as this process is meant to create a European system which should ensure more efficient and effective procedures of investigation and criminal prosecution of crimes damaging the financial interests of the EU;
- Discussion towards the unification of positions of the V4 countries on the draft Regulation on a Common European Sales Law.

Proposed events:

- Meeting of the Ministers of Justice of the V4 countries + Croatia and Slovenia, April/ May 2015;
 - Discussion towards the unification of positions of the V4 countries on the draft Regulation on a Common European Sales Law.
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5. EXTERNAL RELATIONS

5.1. Eastern Partnership

The crisis in Ukraine will undoubtedly have an impact on the subsequent development of relations between the EU and its Eastern neighbourhood as the geopolitical context is once again at the forefront. Even following the signature of the political part of the EU Association Agreement with Ukraine, developments in our closest Eastern neighbour will remain a key factor for the success of the Eastern Partnership in its entirety. Close coordination of positions between the V4 countries and other like-minded EU and NATO Member States will be continued. The primary objective is to preserve political stability, territorial integrity and support for the processes of social, political and economic transformation and modernization of Ukraine. The V4 countries are also set to speed up the political association and economic integration process of Georgia and Moldova, strengthened with a clear European perspective.

The V4 countries should meaningfully contribute to strengthening the pro-European orientation in these countries' political sphere. Assistance must be concentrated into transferring experience gained during the process of transformation, the implementation of Association Agreements, building administrative capacities (institutions and experts) and the approximation of EU laws and standards. The V4 should support increased access for the most advanced reform countries to the European Neighbourhood Instrument and other funds and institutions in the spirit of the "more for more" principle

communication and coordination of the activities of the V4 countries is needed to increase synergies.

It is also a priority to keep the relevance of EaP for all partner countries and build adequate framework for cooperation according to their level of ambition. V4 countries shall provide assistance with the objective of improving the functioning of civil society, people-to-people contacts in the countries of the Eastern Partnership. Capacities of the IVF could be further mobilized with a view to implement well-tailored projects focused on the new situation in Ukraine and also to the individual needs of other partner countries.

The V4 countries will act together with the aim to:

- Support the general guidelines for V4 cooperation on Eastern Partnership set out in the presidency programmes;
- Stress importance of V4 meetings on EaP and meetings of V4 with EaP countries;
- Increase EaP visibility, including by using V4EaP;
- Organize V4 coordination meetings before FACs to prepare common position;
- Strengthen coordination and cooperation on EaP (not only Ukraine) with EU like-minded countries, as well as those countries outside of EU that can bring an added value.

Proposed activities:

- The regular meeting at the level of Foreign Ministers of the V4 + Eastern Partnership countries, spring 2015;
- Following the Presidential elections in Ukraine late May 2014, a meeting of the newly elected Head of State of Ukraine with his V4 partners would seem opportune;
- Conference and project aimed to support Women in Business in Moldova in cooperation with the V4 countries, USA and the Slovak Women Platform.

5.2. Western Balkans

The Visegrad Group shall continue to provide political support to countries aspiring to membership in the EU and NATO, promote the enlargement of the EU as one of the most successful external tools of the Union and support NATO's "open door" policy. V4 countries are open to share experience and best practices regarding development and implementation of sector-specific policies related to their transition and Euro-Atlantic integration. V4 countries shall also continue in organizing diplomatic missions involving representatives of civil society.

In the interest of the V4 countries lies in the expanded use of existing mechanisms and instruments of the EU and the IVF as well as supporting mobility and inter-personal contacts including student scholarships. The Slovak Presidency will strive to intensify cooperation in the area of pre-accession assistance (IPA) and in connection with official development assistance (ODA) while focusing attention on the actual needs of the countries of the Western Balkans and assuring the overall effectiveness of the provided development assistance.

The Visegrad Group remains to be ready to share with countries of the Western Balkans its considerable experience as a successful model of mutual support used in the framework of their integration processes. The preliminary consent of several partner countries with the establishment of a Western Balkans Fund (based on the IVF example) has opened up new perspectives to carry on with the given project aimed at reinforcing regional cooperation in the Western Balkans.

Proposed activities and events:

- Meetings at the level of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the V4 countries and the countries of the Western Balkans with invitations for other EU partners, October 2014;
- Consultation between directors of units for the Western Balkans as advance preparation for the regular V4 + Western Balkans meeting and consultation of V4 Political Directors in a selected country (e.g. Montenegro);
- Continuation of the joint “*Western Balkans Expert Network*” initiative, which has the objective of transferring experience in specific areas with the purpose of strengthening rule of law, as well as enhancing fundamental and human rights in the Western Balkans. The Slovak Presidency intends to conduct a *workshop* for experts from 6 countries in the area of judicial education.

5.3. V4 Cooperation with EU Member States, Third Countries and other Regional Groupings

The growing international prestige of the V4 has been transposed into increased interest among third European countries and global players in cooperation with Central European countries. The ambition of the Slovak Presidency is to build on this positive momentum by further developing the V4+ format.

The Slovak Presidency shall support the continuation of political and expert dialogue with the closest neighbours of the V4 within the greater Central European region. The contacts of the V4 countries with Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania and Slovenia are already extensive in different areas of common interest, and will continue. In close coordination

with the Nordic and Baltic states the Slovak Presidency will focus on the preparation of the next informal V4+NB8 ministerial meeting in spring 2015. Following the recent revival of the V4 and Benelux cooperation at the expert level (European and political directors), possibilities for further promoting contacts at the political level will be sought. The V4 countries share long-standing interest in the deepening of strategic partnership with Germany and France as the leading driving forces of the European integration process. With other EU partners, e.g. Austria or the United Kingdom, common denominators can be looked for in specific European sectorial policies, such as the industrial policy or digital agenda.

Switzerland has recently indicated its interest to upgrade cooperation with the V4 to the political level. A V4-Switzerland summit would appear a timely high-level event, i.a. in view of the Swiss support of project-based activities of the International Visegrad Fund.

The countries of the V4 support Turkey's EU accession process. Political dialogue between the V4 and Turkey has been launched by the previous Hungarian Presidency. The V4 countries are ready to keep communication channels with Turkey open particularly in areas such as energy infrastructure, defence/security and/or innovation.

In relations with the USA the most important global partner of the V4 it is our ambition to continue the regular dialogue at political level. Invitation to the U.S. side will be extended before the next V4+ Eastern Partnership ministerial meeting as US involvement is particularly significant given the critical phase of this project. We shall continue in the proven format of V4 coordination with the USA at the level of political directors and pursue further consultation among foreign policy planning staffs. It is in the interest of the Visegrad countries to take a proactive approach in facilitating the conclusion of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership and as soon as possible. It is also desirable to uphold the communication of the V4's joint position on the issue of possible LNG exports from the USA.

The structural cooperation with Japan has been further enlarged by initialization of the V4+Japan Exchange Year in 2014. Regular political dialogue will be continued for instance on the margins of the ASEM meeting. The Slovak Presidency also has the ambition to organize seminars with Japan on selected subjects of common interest within sector-specific activities.

We will search for opportunities to develop closer contacts between the V4 countries and other global partners. In particular, the Slovak Presidency intends to initiate ad-hoc high-level meetings with representatives of both developed and rising economies around the world, such as the Republic of Korea, India or Mexico. In this context, the planned meetings of the MFA political directors with these countries are a good initial step to be followed up by meetings of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs in the near future. Expert

dialogue focusing on specific areas of possible cooperation on ad hoc basis with China could be launched as well.

The Slovak Presidency will also focus attention on the Southern dimension of the EU Neighbourhood Policy, in particular by continuing V4 contacts with the Union for the Mediterranean.

At the level of V4 MFA Political Directors consultations on pertinent foreign and security policy issues shall be proposed in coordination with the partners in V4+ format depending on current needs and international developments. Apart from regular formats of political dialogue with third countries, Presidency might propose ad hoc political dialogues with other countries or regional groups, based on common interest and needs of foreign policy of V4 countries. Presidency will continue also the process of the ad hoc MFA V4 Political Directors political consultations with the partners or regional groups within the EU, such as V4+Benelux, V4+Baltic states.

Regular consultations at the level of analytical unit directors on topical foreign policy issues with invitation to selected partner countries will be continued. Consultation at the level of European Correspondents could be initiated as well.

5.4. Economic Diplomacy

The Slovak Presidency shall strive to strengthen economic cooperation between the V4 countries and major European and global partners. In this context thematic working meetings in the formats V4+Eastern Partnership, V4+Japan (with emphasis on the area of science, research and innovation), V4+USA (with focus on energy security), possibly joint event on the Trade and Investment Agreement - TTIP are to be considered.

The overall credibility of the region can be further enhanced via fulfilment of international obligations in the economic sphere. The exchange of experience about the impacts of the global economic and financial crisis has been very valuable and should be continued. V4 countries are also invited to share information on indicators dealing with quality of life in our region based on the “Beyond GDP” quality of life indicators developed by the European Commission (level of income and wealth, jobs and health, level of government, the environment, education, public safety, the work-life balance, interpersonal relationships, standard of living and life satisfaction).

The V4 countries, despite their different external institutional background and also having their own foreign trade diplomats’ networks with different geographical coverage support the idea to examine the possibilities of jointly operated trade representation offices in third countries, in order to overcome the regional competition by finding the common strengths, establish joint sectorial presence and reduce operational costs.

In this respect, the Slovak presidency shall propose creating a Working Group in order to systematically consider possible establishment of joint V4 trade representations in selected territories on the presumption that real added value from the point of view of all partners and necessary cost effectiveness can be ensured.

Support of mutual economic cooperation between the V4 will further continue at the level of chambers of commerce and industry. Among the recommendations in the recently adopted Memorandum of Understanding (April 2014) is also the proposal to hold annual meetings of entrepreneurs from the region.

Proposed activities:

- Meeting of MFA Directors General for Economic Diplomacy of V4 countries focusing on preparation of TTIP and the meeting of V4 + USA;
- Consultations between Directors of relevant departments – thematic workshop with emphasis on science, research and innovations in preparation of the planned V4 + Japan meeting on science;
- Joint preparation and coordination of positions relating to economic aspects of the Eastern Partnership project.

5.5. Cooperation in International Organizations

The Slovak Presidency shall preserve continuity in efforts to strengthen the position of the V4 within international forums. We will use the coordination and consultation mechanisms of the V4 in relevant international and specialized organizations of the UN.

Meetings at the political and expert level generate the space needed to assess opportunities to demonstrate unified V4 positions in areas of common interest, especially in cases where such a joint approach could contribute to a more efficient promotion of national interests. It particularly concerns sensitive areas such as issues posing a threat to international security or dealing with human rights, economic, social and other issues. Exchange of information on candidacies submitted by the V4 countries could prove helpful in coordination of possible joint support too. One of the objectives of the Slovak Presidency therefore is to intensify contacts between the permanent missions of the V4 at the UN and other organizations.

The Slovak Presidency shall continue to coordinate the positions of the V4 countries within the International Energy Agency (IEA). Emphasis will be put on improving the presentation of the themes of cooperation between the V4 and the OECD/NEA. We propose to focus on various key topics of the OECD/NEA agenda (the issue of civil liability for nuclear damage, the intentions of the EU to harmonize legal differences

dealing with nuclear liability stemming from the differences in the Vienna and Paris Conventions and the resulting financial implications for the Member States).

Proposed activities:

- Consultations at the level of UN department directors at the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the V4 countries;
- Supporting contacts with experts on the agendas of the principal organs of the UN, including the UN Security Council, the United Nations General Assembly and its other individual UN councils.

5.6. Consular and Visa Cooperation

Consular services of the V4 countries shall continue in on-going cooperation in specific territories and regions (e.g. countries of the Middle East, North Africa, former Soviet Union) with the objective of identifying common problems in the country of accreditation and options for their resolution or the promotion of common interests (e.g. a common approach in dealing with different countries regarding the introduction of visa-free regime or the simplification of the visa procedures at the state border where local authorities apply a selective approach to citizens of EU Member States, such as in some Arab countries). Existing capacities shall be a determining factor when deciding if there is room to expand agreements on representation in the visa procedure to cover additional third countries.

A meeting between the representatives of national consular services in Bratislava is proposed as a thematic event in the area of consular cooperation at which the participants could exchange experience and discuss:

- Opportunities to provide consular assistance through embassies to citizens of the V4 countries in locations where any of the Member States does not maintain a diplomatic mission. Such ability to provide assistance can be formally stipulated if a mutual agreement exists;
- Subsequent expansion of concluded agreements on representation in visa procedure to include additional third countries;
- Opportunity to jointly prepare or coordinate positions on issues discussed in EU working groups taking into consideration particularly the question of the revision of the Visa Code.

5.7. Development Cooperation

Coordination of development policies of the V4 countries during the Slovak Presidency shall focus primarily on finding synergies in transferring transformation experience to countries of the Eastern Partnership with emphasis on Moldova. At the same time the Slovak Republic focuses on engaging public and private sector entities from the V4 countries in the development projects financed by the World Bank, the EU and other international and financial institutions. A third priority area is support for building capacities among parties involved in development projects (public, non-governmental and the private sector) in cooperation with the academic sector. These three priority themes will dominate prepared events and activities.

Proposed activities:

- International conference on the cooperation of the V4 countries in the area of development policy with the participation of the State Secretaries of the V4 countries, 15 October 2014;
- Regular meetings of State Secretaries responsible for development cooperation on the margins of the FAC development policy segment in Brussels;
- Seminar for representatives of public and private sector entities or individuals including NGOs organized in cooperation with the World Bank on supporting participation of these V4 countries' entities in the development projects financed by international financial institutions;
- Professional events focused on building the capacities of parties involved in the development cooperation agenda in V4 countries'
- Meeting of the directors of ODA departments and directors of development agencies on the margins of these professional events.

6. INFRASTRUCTURE

6.1. Energy Security

Common approach of the V4 countries in facing energy challenges is a traditional and intensive area of cooperation due to both historical and geographical factors. The Slovak Presidency is interested in continuing and developing this useful cooperation.

2014 is the year in which the EU internal energy market should be completed. The V4 region can make a major contribution towards its completion. Cooperation in the field of energy should therefore focus on the physical and technical dimension of the internal market by completing energy infrastructure projects to connect the markets of the V4

and on the regulatory dimension of the internal market, where cooperation shall include the harmonized implementation of network codes in the areas of electricity and gas, continuing regional cooperation, integration initiatives and implementing the Road Map towards the regional gas market among Visegrad countries.

The political discussion of the EU energy policy will be a dominant theme in 2014, as climate and energy policy framework for the period from 2020 to 2030 are to be considered. The results of discussions regarding potential EU objectives towards decreasing greenhouse gas emissions, energy efficiency and renewable energy resources in the EU shall have a fundamental impact on the direction of energy policy and the energy sector in the V4. The Slovak Presidency shall coordinate the assertion of common requirements to preserve competitiveness, the security of supplies, level of employment and sovereignty in the selection of the suitable energy mix. In this context, the prospective development of shale gas resources in the V4 countries, as having great potential for improving energy security of our countries, should also be discussed.

The V4 countries are ready to elaborate more on the issues of energy security in relation to recent events in Russia and Ukraine. Due to the complex situation in Ukraine, a special attention should be addressed to the issue of security of supply in the region of V4 plus neighbouring countries. The Slovak Presidency will also focus on enhancement of the regional dimension of security of gas supplies. In this respect, the V4 countries are set to proceed towards elaboration of joint Preventive Action Plans and Emergency Plans also at regional level.

The V4 countries wish to maintain practice related with dialogue on individual positions – both in Brussels and in the capitals. In this regard the Slovak Presidency will also concentrate on the possibility to coordinate during the debate on the measures proposed in the Plan to decrease Europe’s energy dependency that will be presented by the Commission in June 2014.

Nuclear energy plays an important role in the V4 region and its importance will increase in the future. It is therefore the intention of the Slovak Presidency to coordinate V4 positions within negotiations on proposed EU legislation that may have a fundamental impact on the future developments of nuclear energy and its safe and effective use.

The Slovak Presidency shall concentrate on common procedures in the following areas:

- Completion of the EU internal energy market - the contribution of the V4,
 - Continued cooperation of the V4 or V4+ in process of the integration of the market for electricity and gas (+ parallel presidency within the V4 Forum for the integration of the gas market in lines with the Road Map towards regional V4 gas market

including harmonized implementation of network codes in the gas and electricity sector). Continuing cooperation in the areas covered by the Regional Initiatives, seeking possible joint positions in the related platforms (e.g. CEEE Forum). Emphasis on prompt implementation of projects of common interest (PCI) in the gas, oil transport and electricity sectors. North-South energy corridors within the V4 as an integral part of the EU internal market;

- Enhancement of the regional dimension of security of gas supplies,
 - Preparation of the draft of a joint Preventive Action Plan and Emergency Plan at the regional level on the basis of the Council Regulation No. 994/2010 concerning measures to safeguard security of gas supplies;
- A framework for EU energy policy after 2020;
- Cooperation in the area of nuclear energy,
 - Promotion of nuclear energy as a resource suitable for achieving EU low emission target,
 - Providing a counterbalance against efforts to decrease the competitive position of nuclear energy,
- The concept of a joint V4 project to ensure nuclear and energy safety - materials research for a new generation of ALLEGRO reactors;
- Consultations and exchange of information and experience between nuclear regulatory authorities in the interests of preserving the strongly independent standing of nuclear regulatory authorities and a high level safety culture as well as a systematic increase in security standards;
- Consultations and coordination of positions and approaches taken by the V4 countries' attitudes to new initiatives of the European Commission in the area of the peaceful use of nuclear energy (e.g. new proposals in the area of third party nuclear liability regime, the issue of state aid for new nuclear built with the intention of promoting solutions appropriate for the conditions prevailing in the Central European region);
- Ad-hoc cooperation on relevant themes of the EU agenda (e.g. exchanging experience with implementation of the Energy Efficiency Directive).

Proposed activities:

- Meeting of V4 ministers (or V4+) responsible for energy and a joint declaration of ministers, 1st half 2015;
- International conference on the Common Energy Policy of the EU and the Energy Security of Central Europe (CEEC) to be held on 23-25 November 2014 in Bratislava, in the presence of the energy ministers of the V4 and the executive director of IEA;
- V4 High-Level Working Group for Energy, b2b meeting of the V4 Forum for Gas Market Integration, October 2014, January 2015, May 2015;
- On-going coordination of national positions on proposed EU legislation and on international current issues, also by maintaining the practice of coordination preceding

the Meetings of EU Environment and Climate Change Ministers;

- International Conference in cooperation with the OSCE and Energy Charter, October 2014, Bratislava.
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6.2. Transport

The Slovak Presidency will strive to coordinate positions of the V4 countries in the area of the EU Transport Policy for individual types of transport, including initiation of possible joint positions with regard to the current EU legislative proposals or EU strategic documents.

Considering the area of the transport infrastructure funding and TEN-T development, special attention will be given to:

- Boosting the cooperation and coordinated approach in submission of project proposals for effective drawing of the *Connecting Europe Facility* (CEF) funds for implementation in particular the cross-border transport projects within TEN-T core network Core Network Corridors;
- Exchange of the lessons learned from the implementation of the transport development infrastructure projects financed from the EU funds during the previous and current programming period (2007 - 2013 and 2014 - 2020).

In the area of road transport, the Slovak Presidency will concentrate on the exchange of information at the expert level on tolling systems and the introduction of the European Electronic Toll System (EETS).

Furthermore, the Slovak Presidency will pay attention to solving the problem of the bottlenecks in the V4 countries as well.

In the area of air transport the Slovak Presidency will strive to actively promote the interests of the V4, deepen cooperation and the exchange of experience and facilitate continue cooperation regarding the Single European Sky II+ package (SES II+).

In the area of rail transport the Slovak Presidency will strive to:

- Coordinate the works of High Level Working Group on transport connections between the Visegrad Group Countries with the aim to effectively implement the V4 Ministerial Conclusions, signed in Budapest on 27 November 2013;
- Promote the interests of the V4 countries, deepen cooperation and the exchange of experience with regard to IV railway package, including the proposal amending Regulation (EC) No 1370/2007 concerning the opening of the market for domestic passenger transport services by rail (PSO regulation) in line with the V4 Joint Statements adopted in March 2014;
- Initiate a general discussion on the future of the high-speed rail network within the V4,

taking into consideration the necessity of North-South high-speed rail connections;

- Exchange information regarding checks of travel documents for passengers travelling on road when crossing borders, in particular between EU and non-EU countries;
- Examine common opportunities and methods with respect to preserving the level of railway financing by the European Union (2014 - 2020) and joint coordination among the V4 in the completion of the TEN-T railway network, and in particular the core network, with respect to cross-border sections and missing links of the network, their technical parameters and interoperability;
- Focus on the analysis of consequences of social provisions harmonization in European road transport.

Railway connections cannot be omitted as the importance of railway transport is growing due to the relatively high level of safety and low ecology impact as compared to road transport. V4 countries shall discuss opportunities how to develop and modernize existing connections. Promotion of rail transport is crucial for our region to make Central Europe more connected and competitive to the rest part of Europe.

The development and upgrading of waterways and ports with public access might have the potential to make a significant contribution to the economic growth and employment growth in the V4 Countries. The Slovak Presidency will focus on cooperation in creating conditions for inland waterway transport to become a quality mode of transportation: well run, efficient, secure, integrated into the intermodal chain, with quality jobs that are filled by skilled labour force, and meeting high environmental standards. Integrated approaches involving all relevant sectors should be applied with regard to the Danube, being a natural resource.

The Slovak Presidency will also continue in the activities within the common working group for combined transport where the discussion will be focused in particular on:

- Intermodal terminals with the objective of completing and updating maps and selected technical parameters of terminals in the V4 countries as well as on the exchange of information on future planned activities in the V4 countries aiming at building and reconstructing intermodal terminals;
- Mobilising public funds to support operations and construction of the infrastructure for intermodal transport as long as they ensure an equal level playing field;
- Monitoring and comparing infrastructure charges for rail and road infrastructure; examining the possibility of harmonizing the proposed methodologies for defining the charge (access fee, capacity fee) setting process for railway infrastructure;
- Promoting idea of sustainable mobility in the cities, especially in capitals towards using new solutions for transport sector (bicycles, group commuting, closed city centres to car traffic etc.).

Proposed activities:

- Meeting of Transport Ministers on the issue of transport connectivity of the V4 countries using the TEN-T network (March 2015). In addition, a coordination meeting will be held before the Transport, Telecommunication and Energy (TTE) Council;
- Meeting of State Secretaries on integrated urban transport in selected agglomerations of the V4 (November 2014);
- Coordination of the Meetings of the High Level Working Group on transport connections between the Visegrad Group Countries;
- Expert's meeting concerning the cooperation in the area of the TEN-T network development examining the possibility of the submission joint requests for cross-border projects in TEN-T core network corridors to be funded from the Connecting Europe Facility CEF (2nd half of 2014);
- Expert's meeting on the road transport to exchange information on tolling systems and the introduction of the EETS service (1st half of 2015);
- Expert's meeting on the Roadway safety (April 2015);
- Expert's meeting on the combined transport;
- Expert's meeting on cycling (1st half of 2015);
- Expert's meeting on the railway transport with the focus on exchanging the experience from the application of tariff policy in international and domestic passenger rail transport (1st half of 2015);
- Meeting of experts on railway transport to exchanging experience concerning monitoring railway infrastructure access fees (1st half of 2015, organised by the National Transport Authority of Hungary).

7. SOCIAL DIMENSION

7.1. Employment and Social Affairs

The Slovak Presidency shall build upon previous activities focused on alleviating the adverse impacts of the economic and financial crisis and on adopting and implementing measures aimed at social inclusion.

The Visegrad Group shall continue in coordination within the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council (EPSCO), in particular in advance of selected meetings at which important issues on the EU agenda will be discussed, such as specific national recommendations, ex-ante coordination of significant social policy reforms or the social dimension of the European Economic and Monetary Union.

The Slovak Presidency focuses:

- On the mutual exchange of experience in planning and implementing significant reforms of the pension systems in the V4 countries;
- On the exchange of experience in supporting youth employment with the emphasis on the configuration of legislation, project solutions and the implementation of a system of guarantees for young people;
- On the exchange of experience in the field of applying an active labour market policy with focus on disadvantaged groups on the labour market, primarily the long-term unemployed, older people and people with low-level qualifications;
- On the mutual exchange of experience from the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of National Roma Strategies up to 2020 completed within European Commission platforms;
- On cooperation in the Danube Strategy within cross-border projects focused on the development of human capital in the Danube Region in thematic areas such as transnational education programs, improving the position of marginalized communities by developing and upgrading work skills, exchanging best practices between the main players involved on the labour market and by searching out potential dialogue with the Baltic region (EU Strategy for Baltic Sea Region);
- On the question of free movement of people in the context of recent political debate on the exploitation and evasion of social security contributions; the issues concern all the V4 countries and there is need for a common strong position.

Proposed activities:

- International meeting to exchange experience and knowledge with regard to modernization of labour law, its impact on the labour markets of individual countries and active labour market policy. A similar meeting was last held in March 2011;
 - Professional colloquium to promote gender equality in employment involving representatives of the ministries of the V4 countries and experts from universities and academic institutions joined with an expert seminar on protection against domestic violence and assistance for the victims;
 - Participation of ministers responsible for equality at a roundtable organised during the Annual Congress of Women in Warsaw serving as a forum to identify common issues for the V4 countries and exchange of best practices;
 - Conference/panel discussion on the subject “Challenges facing national V4 labour markets and possible synergies in the search for solutions” with the participation of V4 Ministers of Labour and Education during the JOB EXPO, April 2015, Nitra.
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7.2. Education, Youth and Sport

The V4 countries face a challenge to improve the system of life-long and dual education, which creates the prerequisites needed to improve the professional application of individuals at an active age on the labour market. In this field we recommend developing cooperation within the broader region as well (Austria, Croatia, Slovenia). The centre of joint interest of the V4 countries are also Roma issues in relation to education.

7.2.1. Regional Education

In the field of regional education, the Slovak Presidency is interested in focusing on the following:

- Increasing the attractiveness and appeal of Vocational Education and Training (VET) for students and their parents;
- Ensuring a smooth transition of persons from education into the labour market;
- Introducing elements of a dual system of education into national educational systems;
- A system for evaluating VET quality (input and output), also in relation to the European EQAVET instrument;
- Providing high-quality VET, taking into account the needs of persons with disabilities;
- Integrating employers into the process of practical training for students;
- Financial stimulus for employers to enter into VET;
- Creation of educational programs for VET;
- A national system of qualifications;
- Restricting the early termination of studies in VET;
- Establishing links between initial VET and continuing VET.

The Slovak Presidency will continue to prepare the project “Danube Academy of Dual Education”. The Danube Academy of Dual Education will be an institute of dual and theoretical education for the entire Danube region and other V4 countries.

7.2.2. Roma issues

The Slovak Presidency will also focus on promoting inclusive activities in relation to the marginalized Roma community. Insufficient level of education and discrimination in the labour market leads to high Roma unemployment rate. Better Roma integration is one of the important elements of social agenda. The Slovak Presidency intends to continue in discussions focused on Roma issues, exchange of information and experience in the implementation and monitoring of national Roma integration strategies up to 2020, as well as other inclusive programs and projects aimed at the Roma community (educating the teaching staff to the inclusion of the marginalized Roma communities and an inclusive model of education at pre-primary level; the project of practical education of the

Roma communities; national project Social Field Work in Municipalities; national project Community centres; support to employment of long-term jobless persons).

7.2.3. Youth

Pursuant to the priorities of the youth policy at a European and the nationwide level, the Slovak Presidency seeks to pursue the established cooperation from past years with the objective of:

- Continuing to strengthen cooperation between non-governmental organizations and youth workers;
- Effectively using all available sources of funding (the Visegrad Fund, Erasmus+ program, the European Foundation for Youth of the Council of Europe);
- Supporting joint activities in the area of youth at a European level and common priorities (cooperation with countries of the Eastern Partnership);
- Exchanging examples of best practices.

7.2.4. Sport

The priorities in sports during the Slovak Presidency are:

- Continued joint project of the V4 countries on organization of joint sports competitions under the name “Olympic Hopes”, coordinated by the Steering Committee of the “Olympic Hopes” competitions;
- Consultation meeting with the government experts of the V4 countries for the purposes of exchanging knowledge and experience regarding preparations for the Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2016 and the proposals towards a coordinated approach to support for common interests and positions within the EU;
- Regional cooperation in sports policies, sports diplomacy and examples of best practices in sports by representatives of the V4 countries with representatives of other countries (some of these countries are provided on a preliminary basis: Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Serbia and the Ukraine).

7.3. Culture

The Slovak Presidency shall continue:

- Discussions on the role of culture and the creative sector in the V4 countries;
- Discussions on the protection of cultural heritage and its contributions to the development of cultural tourism;
- Cooperation in the field of cinematography in the form of conferences and meetings of professionals from the V4 countries as well as the organization of showings and festivals that present the culture of close neighbours to the public and discussion on the process of digitalization of cinemas in V4 countries;

- In support and continued discussion of experts in the field of cinematography as well as copyright and related rights;
- In support for creating space for continuous communication and cooperation between film collections in V4 countries with the goal of analysing the potential to initiate the creation, inter alia, of common platforms to support co-production projects and to develop co-production and distribution cooperation between entities in the V4 countries;
- In support for inter-cultural dialogue, cultural diversity and related programs in V4 states and in neighbouring regions.

The Slovak Presidency shall continue in the implementation of previously initiated projects:

- The colloquium of library information experts from V4 countries;
- The V4 Cultural Heritage Experts' Working Group and its projects,
 - Series of conferences: Heritage Forum of Central Europe;
- Cooperation in the field of the performing arts in the V4 countries,
 - East European Performing Arts Platform (EEPAP); one of the objectives of EEPAP is to exchange experience from the period of transformation in the V4 countries with other regions of Eastern and Central Europe in the areas of theatre and dance, in particular with countries of the Eastern Partnership;
 - PACE V4, "Performing Arts Central Europe – Focus on Visegrad Countries" is a project of joint V4 presentation at international festivals and markets focused on performing arts.
- Seminar on assessing the use of EU funds in the field of culture;
- Suggestions for subsequent development of cooperation and anticipated activities in the coming period:
 - An international conference focused on film heritage and its digitalization, digital restoration and long-term preservation along with showings of digitally restored films from the V4 countries is prepared within the "Film Heritage in the Digital Era" project,
 - Organizing showings of national cinematography in the V4 countries and in third countries while using the V4 as the common denominator,
 - Year of exchange between the V4 countries and Japan 2014: the Slovak Film Institute proposes that organizers of established film festivals offer a selection of films from the region of the V4 countries, Tokyo International Film Festival, October and Hiroshima International Animation Festival, August 2014;
- The Slovak Presidency will coincide with the 10th anniversary of the establishment of the Anna Lindh Foundation, as a important instrument of intercultural dialogue.

Proposed events:

- Meeting of the V4 Ministers of Culture, June 2015.

7.4. Health

Within the context of demographic challenges and cost pressures related to age and an ageing population, the European Commission in the *Annual Growth Survey 2013* set forth the priority for the Member States to continue cooperation at a European level with the objective of securing cost effectiveness and the sustainability of healthcare systems, the efficient use of public funds and access to high quality healthcare. Determining and promoting common V4 interests within the area of protection of health of elderly people at the EU level will provide the political negotiating potential and thematic foundation that can be built upon within the area of health during the Slovak Presidency of the Council of the EU in the second half of 2016.

In the area of health policy, attention will be also focused on cooperation between Central European countries in the field of healthcare, sharing examples of best practices, their integration into national policies and the promotion of common interests of the V4 countries in European health policy (public health, human resources for health, pharmaceuticals, medical devices and food), including on relevant international forums.

The V4+ platform represents an instrument of major significance, which the Slovak Presidency sees as having the potential to develop active dialogue at the political and professional level for the purposes of finding and sharing solutions in these areas:

- Primary healthcare reform (Slovakia as well as other countries in the region seek nowadays for ways how to achieve increased healthcare efficiency. The investments in the primary care providers, including hospitals, also carrying out the preventive programmes in the area of public health are some of the cardinal measures for improving the quality of healthy life.);
- Regional health management (regional integration of healthcare related services with the goals of better coordination, more efficiency and is one of the areas which could contribute to overall improvement in health sectors);
- Restoration of health infrastructure (outdated infrastructure in acute healthcare area is a common problem of the CEE countries. Investments in hospitals of new generation could provide support of stable, innovative and reforming healthcare systems);
- Management of health data (increasing need for quality health data for policy making, management of health and patients empowerment put pressure on full use of ICT tools and innovations of the 21st century. Electronic health records, ePrescriptions or telemedicine of all countries, not only in the CEE region);
- Cooperation and development in the field of science and research (as a conclusion from FP7 programme experience, support of joint participation in Horizon 2020 could lead to higher success rate of V4 countries);
- Strengthening disease prevention and health promotion (areas of interest: obesity prevention, smoking, increasing alcohol consumption, physical activity promotion).

Health became subject to discussion within the European Semester in 2013 as well as the fact that the and concept “health in all policies” is in line with the current trend in the EU as well as other forums, such as the WHO.

Policy coordination in the V4+ countries makes an important contribution towards following the recommendations and conclusions of the European Commission published in the Investing in Health Commission Staff Working Document in February 2013, which includes a strategy for increasing the efficiency and efficacy of healthcare systems in connection with increased budget restraints for public healthcare. A major factor in the sustainability of the healthcare system may include health investments funded from, inter alia, structural and investment funds. Investments into health infrastructure using European funds may be completed in order to reinforce transformational system changes, in particular to support change from a model of institutional healthcare to a model of community and integrated centres.

V4 countries should also seek common solutions to current security challenges and threats, which may have implications for the health sector.

The following shall continue during the Slovak Presidency:

- Dialogue focused on improving the efficient use of European structural and investment funds to make investments in the field of health;
- Discussion on domestic policies and programs involving integrated forms of care.

Proposed activities:

- Meeting of the Ministers of Health of the V4+ (V4 countries, Austria, Croatia, Slovenia), October 2014;
 - Professional conference of the V4+ (V4 countries, Austria, Slovenia and Croatia) - March 2015;
 - V4 expert meeting at the highest level of Chief Hygienists of the V4, April 2015.
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8. NATURAL RESOURCES

8.1. Agriculture

In the agricultural sector the primary task is to strengthen the coordination and consultation mechanisms of Visegrad cooperation with the objective of finding common positions in matters of common interest and their unified promotion at international institutions (EU, OECD, WTO, FAO and others).

The Slovak Presidency in the area of agriculture focuses discussion on:

- EU Common Agricultural Policy (the impact of reforms on the dairy sector and the stabilization of the dairy sector following the cancellation of quotas in 2015);
- Common approach of the V4 countries towards promoting their interests during preparations of a new package of legislation in the area of food safety (official controls, plant health, animal health, plant propagating materials and invasive species);
- Family farms (as entities capable of revitalizing local economies and key to ensuring food safety, preserving traditional meals and foodstuffs, strengthening mutual cooperation, exchange of experience and the exchange of practical experience of V4 countries);
- Implementation of the new EU Forest Strategy and the Timber Regulation (exchange of information, experience and knowledge from the implementation of the new European Union Forest Strategy and the application of the Timber Regulation in individual V4 countries);
- The management of game animals in border regions (discussion and exchange of information on questions related to conditions for protection, hunting and monitoring the populations of big wild beasts and waterfowl);
- Monitoring of African swine fever situation in the Member States of the Visegrad group and its neighbouring countries (regular exchange of information, coordination of relevant crises groups).

Proposed activities:

- Meeting of the Ministers of Agriculture of V4+ Bulgaria, Romania and Slovenia, September/October 2014;
- Meeting of the Ministers of Agriculture of V4+ Bulgaria, Romania and Slovenia, April/May 2015;
- Meeting at expert level - ad hoc as needed.

8.2. Environment

In the field of the environment one of the key areas on which the Slovak Presidency intends to focus on climate change. Consultation and coordination of the positions of the V4 countries in areas of common interest facilitates the promotion of solutions that are beneficial for all participating countries while taking into consideration local specifics and global needs. In the context of the increased participation of the V4 countries in EU programmes and initiatives (Horizon 2020 and the Danube Strategy), efforts in the field of water management shall be focused on the development of an integrated and jointly coordinated approach towards promoting the interests of V4 countries at the supranational level.

The Slovak Presidency focuses on:

- Discussion of the transition to a green economy, resource efficiency and a circular economy, sustainable resource management with the emphasis on waste management and water management. The way how to effectively connect global dimension with European experiences, in particular in the context of post-Rio+20 processes, including SDGs negotiations. Attention shall also be focused on exchanging opinions, experiences and *best practices* of the V4 countries and other EU Member States in applying and implementing resource efficiency measures, including robust indicators and monitoring, the main problematic areas while implementing such measures, the expected impacts on the economy and distributive impacts of measures (including potential ways of financing them) and the involvement of the private sector, including tight cooperation and exchange of opinions on Resource efficiency and waste Commission legislative initiative;
- Coordination of the common position on adoption of EU climate and energy policy objectives for 2030 framework. Exchange of information, coordination of the positions in regard to EU's mandate for global climate negotiations, including preparation of the national contributions as requested by the decision 1/CP.19;
- Exchange of views on best practices in forest management as well as in protection of forests, related, inter alia, to the climate policy and carbon sinks;
- Strengthening cooperation and the exchange of opinions within the approval process for the air protection package (thematic strategy for air pollution, National Emissions Ceilings Directive and the Medium Combustion Plants (MCP) Directive);
- Discussion and exchange of experience within the fulfilment of selected measures of the EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020;
- Exchange of experience within the fulfilment of the objectives of the "Blueprint to Safeguard Europe's Water Resources" in the context of the Joint Implementation of the EU Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EC), and the Floods Directive (2007/60/EC) from 2013 to 2015 including the resolution of the issue of environmental burdens (removing environmental burdens as one of the instruments to achieve good water conditions in the V4 countries).

Proposed activities:

- 21st meeting of the Ministers of Environment, 1st half of 2015 (regular meeting of ministers focused on discussing numerous pertinent themes);
- Expert meetings on the theme of Natura 2000 - financing from EU funds, mapping, monitoring, evaluating ecosystems and their services, 2nd half of 2014;
- Expert meetings on the climate change topics, 2nd half of 2014 and 1st half of 2015;
- Expert meetings on water in the context of concepts for protecting water resources in Central Europe, 1st half of 2015, V4+2 (Bulgaria and Romania);
- The Slovak Presidency will continue on-going dialogue within the V4 group as regards coordination of national positions on proposed EU legislation and on international current issues, also through maintaining the practice of coordination preceding the Meetings of EU Environment and Climate Change Ministers.



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