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Panel Title: "Visegrad Four and the EU's enlargement and neighbourhood policy"

***Slovakia as a co-runner in Visegrad relays:  
heading for a regional approach to the EU enlargement and neighbourhood policy?***

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**Abstract**

The V4 has become a respected model of multilateral-regional co-operation whose constituents, following the accession to the EU and NATO, have committed themselves to transmitting their experience to partners from the East and South-East Europe. They have also expressed a will to coordinate their proceeding in other closely intertwined issues of regional importance (tackling the energy security problems, first of all). To a greater or lesser extent, such commitments have been translated into strategic documents of the Visegrad countries and their activities on the ground. Besides specifying Slovak foreign policy priorities in this respect, this paper detects whether and how the Slovak Republic has stuck to the agreed-upon effort to meet these regional challenges in concert with regional partners (in the V4 or V4+ format), in particular how it has contributed to the proclaimed interest in the V4 synergy in furthering the Eastern Partnership and the EU enlargement. The analysis covers a period since the beginning of 2009 until now, when the Visegrad Group has enjoyed a symbolically upgraded standing within the EU due to the Czech, Hungarian and Polish EU presidencies. It takes into account the context of the reviewed ENP - applying an increased differentiation and conditionality.

**Keywords**

Slovakia, V4, regional co-operation, neighbourhood, differentiation, EU enlargement

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

All the Visegrad partners - individually, as a quartet and occasionally together with other EU member states (e.g. the Baltic trio, Romania and Bulgaria) - have committed themselves and thus been expected to share their experience with countries beyond the EU borders to support their stabilization, modernization, democratization, progress and alignment with the EU<sup>2</sup>. Such experience do not include “only” carrying out substantial domestic political and socio-economic reforms and fulfilling formal-technical prerequisites of being accepted into the EU and Euro-Atlantic integration structures. A very important part of it is that of learning to cope with the nature of a re-drawn, regionally organized environment. Importance of good neighbourliness, regional co-operation and stability has also been accentuated in the Slovak foreign and security policy strategies. Accordingly, a question of whether and how Slovakia has stuck to the effort agreed-upon by the Visegrad Group to tackle these challenges in concert, in particular of whether and how it has managed to realize the joint Visegrad potential in supporting the EU-promoted multilateral-regional interaction among the Eastern neighbours in line with the reviewed European Neighbourhood Policy<sup>3</sup> and among the Western Balkan candidates and potential candidates for the EU membership<sup>4</sup>, is subjected to scrutiny herein.

Co-ordinating and intensifying the efforts of the Visegrad countries to contribute to successful implementation of the ENP, especially its Eastern dimension entitled the Eastern Partnership; as well as of the Stabilisation and Association process (in some cases already followed by integration agenda) in the Western Balkans, has been one of the key priorities of the Slovak foreign policy since the accomplishment of its major foreign policy goal of joining the EU and NATO. Besides more or less strategic reasons, these are geographic “niche areas” where, based on historical ties – political, economic and social – and its own experience; the Slovak Republic asserts its expertise, and agenda

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example “Declaration of the Prime Ministers of the Visegrad countries”, 10 October 2006; “Joint Political Statement of the Visegrad Group on the Strengthening of the European Neighbourhood Policy”, 22 January 2007; “Joint Statement of the Foreign Ministers of the Visegrad Group Countries and of Bulgaria, Lithuania, Latvia, Romania and Sweden”, 24 November 2008; or a more up-to-date “Resolution of the Senate of the Republic of Poland”, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> The ENP review was introduced in the Joint Communication by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the European Commission on 25 May 2011, following revolutionary upheavals in the Southern neighbourhood, rather limited actual success of the ENP and the Lisbon Treaty conversions of the EU foreign policy conduct.

<sup>4</sup> Whereas official design of the EaP entails bilateral and multilateral track, i.e. a plan to foster regional co-operation among the Eastern Partners in the latter case; the EU has not launched a similar official regionally-organized policy or a complex multilateral partnership with the Western Balkans exclusively. However, littoral WB countries are members of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership with the EU. In addition, the Union has warmly welcomed and backed another regional project in the area – CEFTA (Central European Free Trade Agreement).

and capabilities thereof (Bátora & Pulišová, forthcoming)<sup>5</sup>. For the sake of the development of the countries concerned, their approximation to the EU and intensifying mutual interaction in particular sectors both at bilateral and multilateral level, as designed by the EU (Commission, 2008); Slovakia has expressed its desire to utilize its Presidency in the Visegrad Group, International Visegrad Fund and to a larger extent capacities of NGOs and academia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic, 2009; Visegrad Group, 2010). Within the then ongoing review of the ENP, it preferred greater differentiation of political relations with particular Eastern Partnership countries<sup>6</sup> and corresponding instruments (MFA of the Slovak Republic, 2010).

The period since 2009 till the end of 2011 witnessed not only the launch of the Eastern Partnership in May 2009 but the Czech, Hungarian and Polish Presidencies in the Council of the European Union (the former in the first half of 2009, while the latter two consecutively in 2011)<sup>7</sup>, complemented by the Slovak Presidency in the Visegrad Group since 1 July 2010 till 30 June 2011. Moreover, the post of the European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy has been held by a Czech diplomat Štefan Füle, and that of the Managing Director for Russia, Eastern Neighbourhood and Western Balkans in the recently established European External Action Service by the then former and now current Slovak Foreign Minister, Miroslav Lajčák. Slovakia and the V4 have thus had an extraordinary opportunity to work towards realization of their aspirations vis-à-vis the two “regions” and their foreign and security policy interests that converge with the EU’s enlargement and neighbourhood policy in principle.

### **Visegrad teamwork in relays towards successful EU enlargement and neighbourhood policy**

“[T]he emerging awareness of and ability to build coalitions” (Bátora & Pulišová, forthcoming) for pursuing national as well as common regional interests seems to be one of the lessons learned by Slovak political elites in the EU “environment of multilevel negotiations” (ibid.). Visegrad partners are now naturally prime countries when Slovakia seeks for allies from among the Union mates (MFA of the Slovak Republic, 2008). They have nourished “a tradition of mutual consultations and co-ordination preceding or accompanying key EU meetings and summits” (Pulišová, 2010, p. 33). At corresponding international forums - first and foremost the EU (but, for instance, OSCE as well) (ibid.) - the Visegrad Group has tried to form common positions on important questions on the EU agenda

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<sup>5</sup> For an empirical insight into, discussion and legitimacy of causes and “technologies” of projecting such expertise by so-called new EU member states, see a worthy-to-read conference paper by Merje Kuus (2010).

<sup>6</sup> The Eastern Partnership (hereinafter “EaP”) is addressed to Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

<sup>7</sup> Unlike the Czech EU Presidency, the other two were held in the “post-Lisbon” setting not only changing a role of the Presidency at large but downgrading the importance of presiding state’s representations in third countries in favour of the EU Delegations. It is not a matter of concern here to analyze proceeding or effects of these Presidencies, inasmuch as the paper is deemed to discuss primarily Slovakia’s engagement in furthering the enlargement and ENP agenda and utilizing regional Visegrad co-operation mechanism for the sake of it.

whenever possible, set forth joint initiatives and amendments and pushed forward issues of common strategic importance (Bátora & Pulišová, forthcoming).<sup>8</sup> Besides (cross-)sectoral issues of energy security, cohesion policy, negotiations on the new EU multiannual financial framework (2014-2020); the endeavour has been visible and *continuous* in terms of the enlargement and neighbourhood policy:

First, under each Visegrad Presidency, high-level meetings in the V4 or V4+ format<sup>9</sup> dedicated to the Western Balkans specifically (Visegrad Group, 4 November 2011) and to the Eastern Partnership (ibid., 5 March 2012b) have been organized in order to exchange views on these adjacent “regions” and discuss potential axes of and sources for ever-intensified co-operation with their constituents, whose representatives have also used to be invited and consulted by the Visegrad Presidencies (not only separately but also as a grouping of particular associates)<sup>10</sup>. Second, considering that one of the major attractions of aligning with the EU (standards, legislation and norms) - perspective of free trade with the EU - is a fairly distant target for some East and South-East European partner countries, and that benefits of such alignment with the EU should be perceived by their ordinary citizens as well (Government Office of the Slovak Republic, 2010 /author’s translation and adjustment/); the V4 has persistently appealed for simplifying visa procedures and liberalizing EU visa policy at EU forums. Even when being critical about a partner’s backsliding on reform processes and compliance with requirements of political and economic association with the EU; the Visegrad countries have not slacken off in their commitment to support a new facilitation of EU visa policy to the partner countries and ease an access of their citizens, especially certain categories - students, researchers and journalists - to the EU<sup>11</sup>. They opine that the ongoing visa liberalisation process “should not be held hostage of the lack of efforts by the authorities or their unsatisfactory results” (Visegrad Group, 5 March 2012a). In general, representatives of the Visegrad countries articulate a mantra that there is a need of increasing the support for a more or less developing civil society in East European and South Caucasus countries, regardless of acts of their ruling elites, and of strengthening “people-to-people” dimension of contacts and interaction between the EU and its Eastern neighbourhood; an approach being adopted by the EU as well. Most probably, such voicing has contributed

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<sup>8</sup> For more on the V4 coalition-building potential, see also an IESIR Working Paper “Why preservation of the Visegrad Group in the European Union matters” (Tencerová, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> The V4+ format denotes gathering of representatives from the V4 and some other countries, EU institutions and Presidencies in the Council.

<sup>10</sup> One can recall e.g. the summits of Foreign Ministers of the V4 and the EaP countries in Bratislava on 3 March 2011 or in Prague on 5 March 2012b, both attended by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton, Commissionaire for Enlargement and ENP Štefan Füle and a couple of other top political figures from EU member states in addition.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, The Visegrad Group and Germany Foreign Ministers Statement on the Eastern Partnership (Visegrad Group, 3 March 2011b).

constructively, *inter alia*, to the recent signing of amendments by the European Commission of visa facilitation agreements for citizens of Moldova (27 June 2012) and Ukraine (24 July 2012). Among other things, the amendments are due to simplify visa application procedures and waive visa fees for Moldovan and Ukrainian journalists and their technical crews; and mostly but not only representatives of civil society organizations and youth aged 25 or less participating in various exchange programmes, training, international conferences, cultural, sports and educational events in EU member states (Delegation of the European Union to Ukraine, 2012b; Socor, 2012).

Last but not least, although the V4 states have paid similarly low attention to the EU accession of Turkey and Iceland, essentially they have advocated keeping the EU's (and NATO's) "doors open" for countries willing to join and meeting the necessary requirements, and appreciated awarding them with the candidate and potential candidate status<sup>12</sup>. They have individually through their own bilateral channels and often in conjunction with non-governmental experts, as a Group but also outside of it, strongly and openly supported EU (and NATO) membership aspirations of the Western Balkan countries<sup>13</sup>. All in all, Visegrad countries have attained certain continuity and balanced progress roughly at the same pace in their doings under particular V4 Presidencies. It is evident in the steps mentioned above, formal referring to and praising preceding V4 Presidencies and their activities by the four counterparts in Programmes of the Visegrad Presidencies, as well as in gradual development and longevity of scope of programmes and scholarships administered by the International Visegrad Fund<sup>14</sup>.

But when one looks at a harmony of EU Presidencies held by the Visegrad countries with the Group's endeavour with regard to the ENP, the picture is slightly different. A striking example is the Hungarian Presidency in the Council (in the first half of 2011) that devoted much more attention to the top priority of its Presidency Programme – another, wider regional initiative called the Danube Strategy<sup>15</sup> - than to furthering the Eastern Partnership, one of the key matters of concern of the Visegrad Group. In fact, Hungary did not manage to move the EaP forward during its EU Presidency: It was supposed to host and organize the Second Eastern Partnership Summit in May 2011. However,

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, "Program of the Slovak Presidency of the Visegrad Group", 2010; "Final declaration" from the Conference of Presidents of Parliaments of V4 countries, 15-16 September 2011; or "Joint Statement of the Visegrad Group and Slovenia on the Western Balkans", 4 November 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Concrete means include not only diplomatic activities but delivering many useful projects, financial aid and transfer of know-how "in various areas ranging from regional intergovernmental cooperation, mobilization of the nongovernmental sector, transformation of the state administration and economy, and the internationalization of education, to the adoption of EU regulations and technical standards" (Bátora & Pulišová, forthcoming).

<sup>14</sup> For detailed information about the IVF, please visit the web site: <http://visegradfund.org/>.

<sup>15</sup> The "EU Strategy for the Danube Region" is aimed to encourage co-operation of 14 countries sharing the Danube river basin, including some of the EaP and WB states.

allegedly due to a collision with the date set by France for the G8 Summit and possibly also due to the turbulent events in the North Africa that distracted attention (and need for resources) from the Eastern to the Southern EU neighbourhood (whose stability and development is a cause for concern to France, Spain and other Southern EU member states), the Summit was postponed to the autumn 2011 (Pulišová, 2011). By coincidence, the obligation was transmitted to another V4 partner – Poland, holding the EU Presidency subsequently – that has grasped the task and working on a steady development of relations between the EU and its Eastern partners overall as its pet issue<sup>16</sup>. It has shown up that when one of the Visegrad allies falters in pursuing the Group's interests for any reasons (like Hungary in this case), and when there is a political will to keep the pace of advancing a particular issue among the others; one can rely on the Visegrad “co-runners” and profit by their footing and capacities.<sup>17</sup>

### **Slovakia and the Visegrad potential in supporting EU-promoted “regional” interaction in the Western Balkans and in the Eastern neighbourhood**

Visegrad Group has become not only an internationally respected partner but increasingly a model of successful multilateral-regional co-operation across various sectors, and it is ready to share its experience in this realm with East and South-East European partners (Visegrad Group, 22 October 2010; *ibid.* 16 June 2011; MFA of the Slovak Republic, 2011) who might also utilize advantages of their multilateral-regional co-operation and coalition-building<sup>18</sup>. However, one should realize that for countries striving to assume their right to territorial integrity, torn by mutual border conflicts and warfare only recently, and some of them even until now (e.g. Armenia and Azerbaijan); it may take much longer time to understand and realize high yields of regional collaboration. To aid the process, the V4 should exhibit as much of their joint success made by virtue of the Visegrad co-operation as possible. However, common events and public diplomacy activities within the last Slovak Presidency in the V4, steered and organized by diplomatic missions of the Slovak Republic in third countries and aimed to promote the Visegrad Group, occurred more often in Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Beijing,

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<sup>16</sup> The other three counterparts have been very supportive in preparations and conduct, though.

<sup>17</sup> One can wonder what multilateral meetings and summits with and dedicated to the target countries are actually good for. Although some of them do not deliver concrete outcomes, seem to be mere talking shops, echelons' expensive excursions (sometimes they really are) or results in a disappointment or dissatisfaction of some of the participating parties; one can respond with a counter-question: “Where would the EU be without its summits?” (Fox, 2011). In other words, summits have helped to create regional initiatives, and been a medium through which they evolve and solve their problems (*ibid.*). For more on benefits attributed to multilateral interaction in international relations, see Touval, 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Besides co-ordination of EU and NATO integration efforts (Visegrad Group, 22 October 2010), endeavour “of the Visegrad countries to push forward their strategic perspectives and needs jointly – as a coalition – has significantly increased the potential for their successful promotion at the EU level” (Bátora & Pulišová, forthcoming).

Moscow, Oslo, Lisbon or Cairo than in the capitals of Eastern neighbours or WB candidates/ potential candidates for EU membership<sup>19</sup>.

As regards promoting regional co-operation in the Western Balkans, CEFTA (Central European Free Trade Agreement) that was originally established by the Visegrad partners in early 1990s, has served as an inspiration to the South-East European countries later on to set up their own CEFTA. During the Slovak V4 Presidency 2010/2011, V4 Foreign Ministers' meeting dedicated particularly to the Western Balkans – Croatia, Montenegro, Albania, FYROM, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo - was held in Bratislava (Visegrad Group, 22 October 2010). The participants agreed that Hungary and Poland would pay special attention to the EU enlargement and the Stabilization and Association Process in the Western Balkans throughout 2011 when they were supposed to preside the Council of the EU successively (ibid.). More recently, based on positive experience with utilizing the International Visegrad Fund - which, through its grant schemes available to municipalities, NGOs, various civil society initiatives, individuals, schools and universities; supports interconnecting and confidence-building mechanisms (cross-border co-operation, students and young professionals exchanges, cultural, scientific and educational projects)<sup>20</sup> – the Group has suggested that the Western Balkans build on this successful experience and establish a similar mechanism – a special Western Balkan Fund - for interaction of citizens and institutions in the region (ibid., 4 November 2011). “Talks between the International Visegrad Fund and the Western Balkan countries are now under way” (ibid. 22 June 2012).

Development of co-operation under the multilateral track of the Eastern Partnership is also in the interest of the Slovak Republic, as stipulated by the Foreign Ministry (2010). “Co-operation with and among neighbours allows those involved to tackle mutual regional challenges in the most effective way, save resources and enhance mutual trust.” (Visegrad Group, 16 June 2011) During its Presidency in the V4, Slovakia paid due attention to the exploration as well as realization of a potential to pursue its aims with respect to the Eastern Partnership jointly with its Visegrad counterparts. At an informal meeting (Bratislava, 14 September 2010) held to identify, *inter alia*, intersections of “positions and subsequent joint actions with the aim to advocate strategic interests of V4 countries” (MFA of the Slovak Republic, 2011), the ENP was confirmed to be one of them by the Czech, Hungarian, Polish and the Slovak Foreign Minister (ibid.). Both Southern and Eastern

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<sup>19</sup> List of such promotional activities can be found in the Annex 3 of the Annual Implementation Report of the Slovak Presidency in the Visegrad Group (MFA of the Slovak Republic, 2011). They have been often co-organized also by the Czech, Hungarian and Polish representations.

<sup>20</sup> The Fund encourages interaction not only within its own Visegrad region but also with and between other countries and regions, with a special focus on the East and South East Europe.

dimensions of the ENP were major subject areas of the extended Summit in Bratislava on 3 March 2011. As for the former, the V4 and Germany expressed their readiness to contribute to the transition processes anchoring democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights in the Southern neighbourhood countries (Visegrad Group, 3 March 2011a)<sup>21</sup>. On the same day, the five Foreign Ministers also held a session with their counterparts from the Eastern Partnership countries, Union's High Representative Catherine Ashton and Commissionaire Füle. The V4 and Germany appealed to the EEAS for assigning adequate financial resources for the sake of the EU policy towards the Eastern partners in the next financial perspective (ibid. 3 March 2011b). They also admitted that it would be needed to strengthen Visegrad co-operation in the Eastern Partnership framework, e.g. through joint projects within its multilateral dimension, and to enhance active engagement and visibility of the Visegrad Group in the Eastern neighbourhood (ibid.). "The Ministers reconfirmed their...interest to shape this process politically." (ibid.) In this respect, it is important to realize that there is no "Eastern (European) region" as pinpointed by the EU, and there is no other way how to contribute to accomplishing the EaP multilateral track envisaging regional co-operation among the six partner countries but to join the EU's endeavour to *construct it politically*<sup>22</sup>, including through delivering tangible backing on the ground – at the level of the civil society. Conference of representatives of the Ministries of Finance and Ministries of Foreign Affairs from the Visegrad countries focused on the development of co-operation in providing the Official Development Assistance (ODA) in April 2011 is thus another noteworthy event organized under the Slovak Presidency in the V4. Among other things, geographic priorities of their ODA were discussed with the aim to identify countries where the V4 might possibly merge efforts (MFA of the Slovak Republic, 2011)<sup>23</sup>. On 30 May 2011, Visegrad countries' co-ordinators from the Foreign Ministries for the Eastern Partnership and national V4 co-ordinators met in Bratislava (ibid.) but as often is the case, content and results of discussions have not been made public.

Visegrad Group Foreign Ministers have also supported an initiative of the Slovak Presidency to strengthen Visegrad synergy in approaching the Eastern Partnership by taking opportunities provided by the International Visegrad Fund and to further increase its budget from 2012 on (ibid.). Following a review of the IVF objectives and resources, "a new special program focused on the EaP countries 'Visegrad 4 Eastern Partnership' (V4EaP)" (Visegrad Group, 16 June 2011) was formally established at the end of the Slovak Presidency in the V4, thereby allocating additional resources to the IVF budget

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<sup>21</sup> No concrete enhanced activity pursued commonly by the V4 to support the EU's Southern Neighbourhood has been visible so far. As for the Slovak Republic, it has presided over the Task Force for Tunisia together with the Netherlands.

<sup>22</sup> While a "centre of gravity" of other Union's initiatives for co-operation with neighbouring countries, as in the case of the Black Sea Synergy is the Black Sea, and that of the Union for the Mediterranean is the Mediterranean Sea; as regards the Eastern Partnership, its centre of gravity is Brussels, as admitted by the EU (Eastern Partnership, MEMO/09/217, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> As a result, participants agreed to launch a common ODA project in Moldova (ibid.).

by the four countries. It has started in 2012 with grant and mobility programmes aimed at democratisation and reform, regional co-operation and supporting the civil society, including students' exchange and development of new university courses<sup>24</sup>.

Nevertheless, Slovakia has not been any exception in the Visegrad club. Despite several efforts addressing the "region" as a whole, it has focused more energy and resources on its "priority countries" – Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus (MFA of the Slovak Republic, 2009) - separately<sup>25</sup>. However, by favouring some target countries a priori over the others (under the EaP framework), co-producers and transmitters of the policy and related aid might not be able to comply with the reviewed ENP approach (nicknamed "more for more") which seeks "to intensify assistance to those who...[go] further in democratic and economic reforms" (Ashton / EU Neighbourhood Info Centre, 2012), thereby actually posing a risk of its failure.

The V4 Prime Ministers have welcomed and expressed support for the Communication on the Review of the ENP by the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy introduced as an EU's "new response to a changing neighbourhood" (Visegrad Group, 16 June 2011). Its fundamental principles are applying stricter *conditionality* and increased *differentiation* in relations with neighbours based on their actual performance rather than on geographical closeness or geopolitical importance. In other words, any deepening of the EU's relationship with a particular neighbouring state should be conditional on its progress made in fulfilling commitments to the respect for human rights, firm establishment and living up to the principles of democracy, rule of law, and in implementing political and socio-economic reforms overall, including a part of the *acquis communautaire* (ibid., 3 March 2011b). But "[g]eography is unbeatable in many ways" (Popescu, 2011) and Belarus or Ukraine will always preoccupy more minds, not only in the Visegrad region but in the EU as well, than for example Azerbaijan or Armenia (ibid.):

During the last Slovak Presidency in the V4 and under the government constituted after the parliamentary elections in June 2010, human rights have gotten high on the Slovak foreign policy

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<sup>24</sup> Rules of the V4EaP were adopted in March 2012 under the next V4 Presidency held by the Czech Republic. (You can find more details about the V4EaP available: <http://visegradfund.org/v4eap/>.) On this occasion, NGO representatives and experts from the V4+the six EaP countries attended a common seminar (Visegrad Group, 5 March 2012b).

<sup>25</sup> For example, the only EaP country representation invited to the extended summit of Heads of States on the occasion of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the Visegrad Group on 15 February 2011 was that of Ukraine. Other gatherings in the V4+particular EaP country (mostly Ukraine and Moldova) can be found in the Appendix 1 of the Annual Implementation Report of the Slovak Presidency in the Visegrad Group (MFA of the Slovak Republic, 2011). (In the aforementioned Western Balkans; Serbia, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Montenegro can be considered "priority countries" of the Slovak foreign policy due to longevity and intensity of ties, and amount of expert and material assistance thereof.)

agenda. In the aftermath of the fraudulent presidential elections in Belarus in December 2010, accompanied by violent suppression of street protests and political repressions; Prime Ministers of the Visegrad states, Germany and Austria stressed their interest in promoting the pillars the Visegrad Group is based on – freedom, democracy, shared values and *regional co-operation* – further in their Eastern neighbourhood (Visegrad Group, 15 February 2011). They also endorsed “the travel ban and asset freeze imposed by the European Union” (ibid.) against Belarusian top officials in charge of the discriminatory regime and political persecutions. In a common declaration of the Visegrad states and Germany, the Foreign Ministers “committed to pursue an enhanced human rights dialogue with the [East European] partner countries” (ibid., 3 March 2011b). They have also called on Belarusian authorities “to immediately release all political prisoners and to end political repression and harassment of the opposition, independent media and civil society” (ibid.), and *conditioned* continuation of the dialogue with Belarus by its progress towards democratization, respect for the rule of law, human rights and freedoms (ibid.).<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, it is striking that such a conditionality and “policy of critical engagement, including through dialogue and the Eastern Partnership” (Visegrad Group, 15 February 2011) claimed and performed by the Visegrad Group and the EU<sup>27</sup> has not been applied in a similar vein in their relations with other backsliders like Azerbaijan, where the regime of the President Ilham Aliyev “has almost eliminated political opposition through a combination of state repression and election manipulation, and has harassed independent media” (Kobzová & Alieva, 2012).

Treatment of the political opposition, fairness and openness of political competition, business environment and some other important matters of concern for democratic regimes and free market economies have been deteriorating during the current Yanukovich’s Presidential incumbency in Ukraine, too. Accordingly, the EEAS on behalf of the EU as well as particular member states have expressed their concerns, criticized judicial proceeding or a so-called “selective use of justice” in the case of the former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko<sup>28</sup>, and the process of Ukraine’s closer association with the EU has slowed down. However, hopes for Ukraine’s (partial) EU integration and reactions to its defections from adhering to corresponding standards and conditions differ among EU member states, including the V4. Moreover, “although the Visegrad platform is a useful one, the countries do not always use it as the *main* vehicle when addressing the Eastern Partnership”

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<sup>26</sup> Slovak Foreign Minister Dzurinda “also took up the case of Belarus in Brussels, sending a letter to Catherine Ashton” (The Economist, 29 March 2011), and asking the European External Action Service to tighten up measures and consider further sanctions against Lukashenko’s regime (ibid.). In addition, the then State Secretary at the MFA of the Slovak Republic Ježovica and his team were working closely with Slovakia’s seasoned NGOs and academia (ibid.) to help jailed opposition candidates and activists and their families, Belarusian students expelled from Universities due to their resistance to support the regime, and intimidated media and civil society organizations (see the summary report by Lexmann, 2012).

<sup>27</sup> The exact wording as put in the V4 Statement (15 February 2011) can be found in various EU dossiers as well.

<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, “V4 Statement on Ukraine” (Visegrad Group, 10 August 2011) or The Economist, 26 June 2012.

(Kobzová, 2012). Occasionally Poland, especially through its Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski, cannot resist the temptation to perform on par with other, rather big and more practised EU members such as Germany or Sweden who are also deeply engaged in the ENP-making and –shaping, and consider themselves “one of Ukraine’s strongest friends and allies within the EU” (Swedish diplomatic source in a personal interview, March 2012)<sup>29</sup>. It implies, according to a Swedish diplomat, that they want to be frank with Ukraine about issues like its deteriorating investment climate (ibid.)<sup>30</sup>. But in essence, Poland considers Ukraine its “strategic partner” (MFA of the Republic of Poland, 2012), and envisages close co-operation “with Ukraine and other countries in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus” (ibid.) in its foreign policy priorities for 2012-2016, where “[c]onsistent support of EU aspirations of the people of Ukraine” (ibid.) belongs to. Slovak diplomacy has also declined to turn its back on Ukraine, with whom it wants to develop a critical dialogue, considering that Ukraine’s approximation to the EU is in a long-term interest of the Slovak Republic (Lajčák, 2012). Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has criticized European leaders for politicizing and boycotting the EURO 2012 football championship (Collett, 2012) but in general, Hungary has been rather shy to comment on Ukraine’s domestic situation, presumably due to being politically conditioned on its own controversial legislation by the EU<sup>31</sup>. As regards the Czech Republic, in the last two years, its relations with Ukraine have been negatively affected by granting asylum to the former Ukrainian Minister of Economy Bogdan Danylyshyn and Tymoshenko’s husband Oleksander later on by the Czech Republic, empty Czech Ambassadorial chair in Kyiv for over a year, allegations of espionage and mutual declaring a few employees of their Embassies *persona non grata* in the spring 2011<sup>32</sup>. Nevertheless, an attitude and interest of the Czech Republic vis-à-vis Ukraine, that is slightly different from the other three Visegrad countries, stems from the fact that the Czech Republic does not have a common border with Ukraine, according to the Czech President Václav Klaus (SME, 2012). Indeed, the Czech Republic is the most open critic of Ukraine’s state of affairs from the Visegrad Group. During our discussion about critical comments on Ukraine’s “dismal record of business climate” and using “selective justice for political ends” made publicly by J.M.P. Teixeira, Head of the EU Delegation to Ukraine until the late summer 2012<sup>33</sup>; a Czech diplomat praised “the Ambassador” Teixeira for

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<sup>29</sup> Let us recall e.g. the Eastern Partnership initiative as such, submitted to the European Council jointly by Poland and Sweden; or the more recent Swedish-British-Czech-Polish-German Foreign Ministers’ reaction to the “Ukraine’s Slide” published in *The New York Times* (4 March 2012).

<sup>30</sup> “As long as Ukraine keeps maintaining that they want to have closer integration, that they want to sign the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement and the Association Agreement, then we have to tell them what it does mean. We cannot open our market to a country where the investment climate is going down, where the courts are not impartial, etc. So we have to be honest about that,” (ibid.) concludes the source from the Embassy of Sweden to Ukraine.

<sup>31</sup> For more details, see for example Pop, 2012.

<sup>32</sup> For more details, see for example iDNES.cz, 2011 or Nosálková & Němec, 2012.

<sup>33</sup> The speech was delivered on 28 February at the Ukraine’s Tripartite Commission meeting (Delegation of the EU to Ukraine, 29 February 2012a) but J.M.P. Teixeira has raised the concerns over Ukraine’s internal situation affecting its prospects for signing and ratifying the Association Agreement with the European Union repeatedly.

dismantling “an ‘alluvium’ of propaganda and misinterpretations delivered by Kyiv officials to the public”. It is necessary, as he further remarked, as far as one is “a part of a public dialogue and supposed to conduct a public diplomacy...one cannot let the Ukrainian citizenship think that everything in the integration process between the EU and Ukraine is running smoothly in a way that some Ukrainian officials try to foist such an impression on their electorate in various media performances” (March 2012).

All in all, although the Visegrad countries have jointly called on the East European and South Caucasus partners to fulfil their commitment to democratic reforms and intensive dialogue with the civil society (Visegrad Group, 5 March 2012a), and “[r]eiterated the need to strengthen the rule of law and to guarantee the impartiality of judiciary” (ibid.) in the six countries<sup>34</sup>; individual messages they send to the Eastern neighbourhood sometimes differ significantly. More importantly, the difference in opinions and conduct of relations with Ukraine and other neighbours that should be governed by the revised ENP principles of stricter *conditionality* and increased *differentiation*, seems mainly due to the factor of geographical closeness and geopolitical importance rather than an actual performance of the EaP countries (the exact opposite of what should be the criteria for applying the conditionality and differentiation principles), as confirmed by the Czech, Slovak and Polish Presidents<sup>35</sup> as well as by several EU member states’ diplomats based in Kyiv independently of each other<sup>36</sup>: “It is understandable that most of the countries that have a common border and are neighbours; have a robust track record of ties - economic, people-to-people, etc. So they try to search for ways how to improve the situation by as moderate means as possible, or ways that will not provoke further reaction, potentially harming bilateral relations in turn.” (Diplomatic source in a personal interview, March 2012) In other words, neither Slovakia, nor the Visegrad Group (nor the EU, after all) has mastered the updated approach to the Eastern neighbourhood yet. In attempts to do so, the V4 as a positive example of regional “relay runners” should devote due attention to compliance of the EaP countries with principles the Visegrad Group is based upon and the partners have also sing up to follow at the same time. It includes active engagement in the multilateral dimension of interaction among the Six and with the EU, i.e. boosting and overseeing adoption of regional approach to building relations in and with the neighbourhood. Considering that the multilateral track of the Eastern Partnership is one of the cornerstones of this framework for co-

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<sup>34</sup> Strikingly, despite the signs of Ukraine’s backsliding, the V4 countries have expressed their support for early initialling and subsequent signing and ratification of the Association Agreement with Ukraine, including the DCFTA, at the same time (ibid.).

<sup>35</sup> Václav Klaus (CZ), Ivan Gašparovič (SK) and Bronisław Komorwski (PL) commented on the issue during their meeting in the High Tatras, Slovakia, in early May 2012 (SME, 2012).

<sup>36</sup> The author interviewed a couple of diplomats (at the level of an Ambassador or chargé d’affaires) from the Embassies of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, the Netherlands and Sweden to Ukraine in the first half of 2012.

operation, compliance with it should be posed and applied as a *condition* for proceeding towards closer political and economic association with the EU. It is mostly Ukraine's political representation (from the entire spectrum of political parties), i.e. the largest neighbour and clearly one of the "priority countries" for some of the Visegrad partners; who tends to undermine an added value of the multilateral track of the proposed Partnership<sup>37</sup>, thereby showing its lack of understanding of plenty of benefits of multilateral-regional co-operation (e.g. building soft security or simpler pragmatic reasons such as saving time and costs by gathering in multilateral settings).

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<sup>37</sup> In personal interviews with two members of Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian Parliament) - one from the ruling Party of Regions and one from an opposition party - both argued that Ukraine has held a specific position among the Eastern Partnership addressees – that of a leader: While for some of the target countries, multilateral co-operation within the EaP could be a kind of a stimulus, it is not the case of Ukraine for whom the EaP major objectives have already become realities, according to one of the respondents. That is why they (Ukrainian officials) generally do not see the Eastern Partnership framework suggesting regional co-operation of the Six as working to Ukraine's advantage, as added by another interviewee, and they think they can be more successful at the bilateral level. [The interviews were conducted in Kyiv in late April/ early May 2012. The author is extremely grateful to H.E. Mr. Pavol Hamžík, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Slovak Republic to Ukraine, for his kind and irreplaceable help with arranging the appointments with the two politicians.]

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Information gained by means of interviews with diplomats from several EU member states' Embassies to Ukraine and two Ukrainian MPs, conducted in Kyiv in the first half of 2012, was also used in the paper.