

# ESSAY

## POST-EU-ACCESSION VISEGRÁD COOPERATION — RESULTS, RHETORIC, PROSPECTS

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### ABSTRACT

*While most of the attention in Europe is focused on what is happening in Ukraine, it feels somewhat inappropriate to write about international affairs without dealing with these events. Even more so, if the topic is the Visegrád Group<sup>1</sup>, since many aspects of the Ukrainian situation concern joint and individual interests of the V4 states and, from an analytical point of view, a crisis like this will provide an exciting case study about how, if at all, the Visegrád states can coordinate their steps in a critical situation. However, this comprehensive essay deals not with one topical issue or particular aspect of Visegrád cooperation, but examines what post-accession V4 cooperation actually consists of, how successful it has been and, most importantly, how it is seen and communicated by the political leaders who actually shape its future.*

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<sup>1</sup> All commonly used alternative names (Visegrád Cooperation, Visegrád Four, Visegrád Group, V4 or simply Visegrád) are used in this paper. “The Group” or “the Cooperation” also refers to the V4.

## INTRODUCTION

In general and in the Central European context, activities of regional groupings rarely appear in widely read articles, let alone come up in conversations amid the traditional popular indifference to foreign policy issues. However, cooperation in Central Europe has become and remains to be an everyday reality which cannot be overlooked when attempting to understand the region's internal and external relations or assessing its prospects. Although regional cooperation in Central Europe is not limited to the Visegrád Group, it is with purpose that the present paper deals with this grouping, accepting its description as the "most clearly defined initiative"<sup>1</sup> in the region. Despite the low V4-related popular awareness, comments about the alleged lack of tangible results and the once widespread, now obsolete scepticism about the initiative's post-accession staying power, the V4 did not fade or cease to be active. On the contrary, it shows considerable activity, directing attention to a new period of the evolution of what could be called the "Visegrád idea". This idea—just like every similar undefined and sentiment-related concept—should be treated carefully, but the evaluation that the V4 entered into the third decade of its existence "as a respected and efficient regional initiative, with a steadily improving reputation"<sup>2</sup> is no exaggeration, provided that its results are interpreted in the adequate context and are contrasted to realistic expectations. As far as the past few years are concerned, some claim that a renaissance or revival of the V4 has been going on: Visegrád "[came] crashing back onto the European scene", partly because of "the commonality of interests among regional policymaker establishments after a string of elections heralded an amenable constellation of mostly like-minded governments"<sup>3</sup> in 2010. At the same time, it is argued that the V4 "did not succeed in determining any priority of such an importance as was the integration into the EU and the NATO during the pre-accession period".<sup>4</sup> This prompts the question whether the Visegrád Group is, or will soon be, engaged in some kind of conscious or "latent" vision-making process, which would be logical considering that it has actively existed as an intra-EU grouping for almost ten years now. A number of articles explicitly outline the necessity of forming some kind of long-term vision or strategy for the V4. It is now a fact that the V4 survived the achievement of its strategic goals (EU and NATO integration) and carries on with meaningful activities, but this does not mean that the Group's future course is unambiguous and pre-determined.

The Group's existence and activities have been accepted as "business as usual" and the related discussion is increasingly shifting towards "what" and "how" questions from "why" and "yes or no" questions about the initiative's *raison d'être*. While in this newest chapter of its history, the V4's particular activities—which encompass many cooperation areas as included in official Visegrád declarations and other documents—are increasingly well-researched,<sup>5</sup> less attention seems to be paid to the characteristics, significance and future potential of the initiative as a whole. One consideration behind the choice of topic of the thesis on which this essay is based on was that the commonplace about how important immaterial factors, words and sentiment are in politics and international relations proves particularly true in the V4 context. In the absence of institutionalisation and automatised, binding mechanisms of cooperation, the place that the Visegrád Cooperation has in the mind-set of the Visegrád states' political leaders represents an important lead in assessing the Cooperation's prospects as well as an indicator of how successful or significant the V4 really is or can become. The thesis, therefore, examined not only what the V4's activities actually included and how successful cooperation was, but also how the academia and, more importantly, leaders of the Visegrád countries expressed their views about the initiative itself.

The research aimed to establish the validity of hypotheses about the V4 states' political leaders' communication about Visegrád, by examining a number of V4-related statements by the four countries' presidents and prime ministers in office between 2004 and 2013, which defined or described the Cooperation itself (and not only particular issues subject to cooperation). First, it was supposed that there existed a *Visegrád-related political discourse* in the sense that the leaders often made statements about Visegrád itself, describing its "nature", "essence", importance, successfulness and other features. Second, it was expected that the *V4-related statements examined were generally optimistic and enthusiastic*, often invoking sentimental factors like a sense of "togetherness" and "regional identity" in Central Europe, interpreting them as facilitators or even inevitable determiners of cooperation in the region. The third hypothesis was that there were substantial and/or stylistic *dividing lines in the V4-related communication*, depending on the respective leaders' national and political affiliation. The fourth hypothesis concerned the V4's alleged "renaissance" and views about the timeliness of creating a long-term "Visegrád vision" or strategy: it was expected that recent V4-related

statements of the leaders indeed reflected an *increase in the Group's importance, and confirmed the presence of a political intention to formulate some kind of vision for the V4* to secure its permanent existence as an intra-EU bloc and ensure the exploitation of its capacity, *but proposals for such a vision, strategy or a better characterised future role are yet unclear and undetailed.*

The present essay, an abridged version of parts of the original thesis, introduces briefly what post-EU-accession V4 cooperation consists of and how successful it can be considered, it presents results of the research on the leaders' V4-related statements and then summarises the thesis' conclusion.

### VISEGRÁD COOPERATION AT A GLANCE

For more than two decades now, the V4 countries have been involved in regional cooperation, the launching of which was described by the V4 Prime Ministers as an important event in the modern history of their nations and countries.<sup>6</sup> It is arguably “one of the liveliest regional initiatives in the European Union”, even if there is no self-evident answer as to what Visegrád's “essence” or significance may be and its successfulness is not above dispute. In the words of Tomáš Strážay, the V4's history “might disappoint both optimists and pessimists”<sup>7</sup>. Popular ignorance or interpretational confusion around the term ‘Visegrád Cooperation’ and its variants may be understandable. After all, it is not ordinary that a regional grouping is depicted as “intangible fog”<sup>8</sup> or a political leader deems it necessary to publicly differentiate it from a “political masonic lodge”.<sup>9</sup> It is doubtful whether defining what the V4 really is, or trying to identify some “underlying meaning” behind the cooperation, is possible at all and, as some parts of this essay will show, many descriptions compete in this respect. However, given the circumstances, pursuing a dialogue about “what to do” with Visegrád, how to interpret its successfulness and assess its prospects is increasingly important. Notably, the mere fact that the V4 still exists is an unexpected development, and it cannot be said that the initiative's history is free of hurdles. Besides, the V4 continues to deliver results even a decade after the strong pressure on Central European governments to demonstrate their ability for dialogue and cooperation—which was interpreted by many as the only or most important reason behind starting the V4—became irrelevant. Before turning to the topic of how the

“mysteriously” revived post-2004 Visegrád Cooperation is defined or described by those who examine it as academics, and by the leaders who fill the V4 framework with content and shape the initiative’s course, it may be essential to briefly answer the question what actually happens under the term Visegrád Cooperation.

A Central European regional cooperation initiative, the V4 was launched officially by the prime ministers of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, Hungary and Poland with the signing of a declaration known as the “Visegrad declaration” in 1991. Strictly speaking, the verb “launch” is correct while “establish” or “found” would not be, as the initiative is not an organisation and thus a legal entity. Cooperation among the participating countries in the V4 framework manifests itself, primarily but not exclusively, in the following: a) *declarations*, adopted at the highest political level, outlining the basis for and goals of cooperation, setting cooperation areas, priorities, objectives and also the structure and modalities of cooperation; b) *meetings at various levels and in various forms* between leaders, politicians, experts, authorities and various bodies of the Visegrád four and occasionally non-V4 countries at summits, working meetings, conferences, seminars and so on, with the aim of exchanging views and/or coordinate action in the wide range of issues which are of interest for the four states (including intra-EU coordination before summits, decisions etc.); c) *the International Visegrad Fund*, the V4’s only institution, which aims to strengthen the cooperation’s “civic dimension” and plays an important role in the V4’s external activities, by financing cultural, scientific, educational etc. projects in and around the Visegrád region; d) *defence-related cooperation*; and e) the maintaining of a so-called *Visegrad House*<sup>10</sup> in South Africa (used jointly by the local embassies to perform consular activities and organise events), with the establishment of a new “joint representative office” in Vietnam having been announced in October 2013.<sup>11</sup> While not a separate type or field of V4 endeavour, external *brand-building* for the Central European region, and all Visegrád-activities that concern building or maintaining *relations with non-V4 actors* including states, organisations, societies and so on, are also increasingly important.

Although the V4 is not an international organisation, it has a “quasi-institutional backbone” in the form of declarations and other documents adopted at high-level meetings of the four countries’ leaders: the “Visegrad Declaration” of 1991; a document entitled “The Contents of Visegrad Cooperation”, signed by the four prime ministers in Bratislava in 1999; a

document on the “Role of Presidency of the Visegrad Group”, attached to the previous declaration as an annex in 2002; the second “Visegrad Declaration” known also as the “Kroměříž Declaration”, issued after the participating states’ EU accession in May 2004 (with the “Guidelines on the Future Areas of Visegrad Cooperation” attached); and the “Bratislava Declaration”, the V4’s most recent comprehensive document, signed by the prime ministers in 2011 on the occasion of the Group’s twentieth anniversary. These “quasi-strategies” include remarks about the situation and challenges in Europe and Central Europe, list objectives, priorities and practical steps of cooperation to be taken, and set the loose cooperation framework to be followed. Among the declarations there are shorter and more general ones, but it is fair to say that each document, including the first declaration, contains distinct goals and areas of mutual attention and interests, as well as elements of a symbolic nature, with the former usually outweighing the latter. The declarations show a trend of concretisation and practical conceptualisation, and they also show continuity, they refer to and build on the content of previous documents, highlighting successes achieved along the way, and indicating where continued cooperation seems promising and feasible. From the perspective of evaluating the V4’s actual results, these declarations’ significance is that they show a continuous political will to pursue a kind of cooperation that goes well beyond PR-handshakes. The fact that several consecutive governments have in fact contributed to this process of laying down mutual commitments and assigning a cooperation structure to support their realisation is significant political performance in itself, and gives something real to look at for those asking for Visegrád’s actual achievements. So does another, even more concrete measure of cooperation: the sheer *number and frequency of meetings* through which Visegrád primarily operates. Within the Visegrád framework, the V4’s prime ministers, heads of states, ministers, government officials, politicians, experts and other individuals and groups have met countless times.<sup>12</sup> By today, counting also the events not listed in the official chronology, it is safe to say that the number of various meetings between leaders and other actors from the V4 countries under the auspices of V4 is well above 400. This number is significant even without considering the content and output of all meetings, as it highlights continuity in motivation behind the actual cooperation: in the absence of formal requirements and legal obligations, more and more actors have been involved in exchanges of view and smaller or larger scale coordination. Arguably, the meetings have contributed to creating an informal but long

lasting 'V4-conscious' network of individual participants, which is easily interpretable as implicit added value, even if it may be hard to sell as tangible or spectacular. Although with different levels of actors, a similar effect is being realised through the *International Visegrad Group's (IVF)* activities, involving the civil sphere of the V4 countries and others in the broader region that is of interest for Visegrád's external activities. Promoting development of closer cooperation among the V4 and strengthening "the ties among people in the region", the IVF funds "common cultural, scientific, research and educational projects, youth exchanges, promotion of tourism and crossborder cooperation."<sup>13</sup> The number and scope of projects as well as the issue of financing serve as further markers of the cooperation's intensity: according to the IVF's summary, more than 3700 grant projects and 1700 scholarships and artist residencies were supported as of the end of 2012, and the IVF's yearly budget, composed of equal contributions of the V4, rose from 3.2 million euros in 2006 to 7 million euros in 2012, with the total worth of the projects' funding around 47 million euros.<sup>14</sup>

#### POST-ACCESSION VISEGRÁD COOPERATION: AN UNEXPECTED REVIVAL

Visegrád is now ten years into its newest period of existence as a grouping of states that are all full-fledged members of the EU. When trying to evaluate the V4's current situation, the way its chances looked like in the run-up to the 2004 EU-enlargement has to be remembered. The "breakdowns" or "setbacks" in cooperation, usually attributed to competitive attitude and national ambitions overwriting the idea of solidarity and coordination in the EU-accession negotiations, prompted many to seriously doubt the V4's mere survival. The problems were not as insignificant as they might seem in retrospect: some wrote about the "most painful and most illuminating failure of Central European cooperation"<sup>15</sup>, while some went as far as envisioning the end of Central Europe.<sup>16</sup> Beside general scepticism about the V4's ability to survive these problems, the EU-accession of the Visegrád states meant the accomplishment of the most important goals the V4 had worked for. It was to the surprise of many that the V4 survived the gloomy pre-accession period and, most importantly, cooperation was renewed after the turning point brought about by the realisation of Visegrád's "strategic" goals. Note that the cooperation's persistent activity comes despite the fact that the "eastern threat"—a

shared legacy of post-Communist Central Europe—once perceived so vividly is long gone, the political and economic transition has been completed, and the EU- and NATO-accessions rendered the cooperation's main goals obsolete. To be sure, the Visegrád states have had to adapt to the changed environment and it is true that the “internal dynamics of EU decision-making, the changing voting alliances [...] have created pressures on V4 countries, which arguably have similar interests, to cooperate” and this acted as a catalyst to increase cooperation,<sup>17</sup> but the V4's post-EU-accession renewal can be considered a milestone from the aspect of motivation, too. As opposed to earlier when the cooperation was born “out of external pressure and internal fear”, the V4 started to focus on acquiring and realising the culture of “voluntary cooperation recognised out of inner necessity”, so the main significance of this revival was indeed that it “confirmed that [...] Central Europe's political dimension can be nothing but cooperation”.<sup>18</sup>

Within the cooperation areas of the post-2004 cooperation framework, set primarily by the 2004 Kroměříž Declaration (the first post-accession “quasi-strategy”) and the 2011 Bratislava Declaration (the V4's most recent comprehensive document), a wide range of old and new activities have been and still are being realised. Instead of presenting a lengthy enumeration for which the confines of this paper do not allow, the essay merely offers the author's view on the successfulness of post-accession V4 cooperation, so as to introduce the context in which Visegrád-related political statements should be interpreted. In an attempt to assess the Cooperation's actual successfulness objectively, the thesis this essay is based on thoroughly examined literature, official reports and other sources about the V4's post-2004 activities. Visegrád Cooperation is primarily understood in this essay as a framework which is or is not taken seriously and filled with meaningful content depending on the intentions of decision makers and lower level actors involved. The thesis argued that, to determine whether the V4 can actually be considered successful, its activities should be examined by looking at whether certain minimum and optimum requirements are being met. *The minimum requirement concerns the input side of cooperation:* it is being met provided the four states' representatives take the cooperative structures seriously by ensuring regular participation and producing actual input. This can, of course, mean one thing at high-level political talks and completely different things at lower level expert meetings or other types of activities. Under no circumstances does the word ‘minimum’ does refer to

the level of effort that has to be made to meet this requirement: ensuring the parties' meaningful input demands constant commitment and actual resources, which are not evidently given in the case of any regional grouping. 'Minimum' only implies that, without this requirement being met, it is impossible to talk about cooperation in the strict sense, let alone successful cooperation. *The optimum requirement concerns the output attributable to activities under the cooperation framework*: it is met when the planned activities not only take place but also produce substantial output, to the satisfaction of all four states, whether this output be a joint statement, a decision of principle, successful joint lobbying, any minor practical result, the strengthening of the V4 brand and so on. Obviously, it is easier to give an account of the extent to which the minimum requirement is met, while measuring the realisation of the optimum requirement is much more problematic, but evaluations ignoring the examination of said requirements are prone to contain only shallow criticism or, on the contrary, wishful thinking and idealistic optative statements about the V4. Based on the mass of facts available, the thesis concluded that, *in the post-accession period of Visegrád Cooperation, the minimum requirement mentioned above is definitely and spectacularly met. As far as the optimum requirement is concerned, the question whether it is usually being met in the post-2004 period can be answered with a cautious yes*, considering that the post-accession period is not free from disagreements occasionally hindering substantial output (see, for instance, the divergent stances on the Lisbon treaty, US anti-missile defence system, the Georgian conflict, Kosovo etc.). Along the civic and cultural dimension, the increasing scope and depth of IVF activities which are pursued methodically, following goals set by the V4 foreign ministers, clearly indicate success and represent the most tangible V4 results. As regards intra-EU cooperation it is statistically "traceable" that consultation mechanisms emerged as permanent tools for coordination in cases when the given issue proved to be of common interest; and concrete results, even if lower scale or partial, are also presentable. In terms of foreign relations, the countless meetings with various external partners represent added value in themselves but have also lead to concrete new initiatives. Also, it seems that the Visegrád countries take their determination to "become ambassadors of countries awaiting integration with the European Union"<sup>19</sup> seriously.

POST-ACCESSION V4 IN POLITICAL RHETORIC:  
A COMMON VOICE IN CENTRAL EUROPE?

The V4 has been described and evaluated a hundred times in many different ways. Some find it easy to criticise it for the perceived lack of real content and value, while others applaud its continued existence or even a perceived increase of significance as the long-awaited manifestation of the recognition of a “common Central European” fate. In any case, the V4 has been and continues to be active in the conceivable future, and the initiative’s course will primarily (although not exclusively) be determined by the perceptions and decisions of actors who influence the Visegrád states’ politics: first and foremost the countries’ political leaders. Therefore, a comprehensive analysis about the Group should include the examination of V4-related communication of the most influential actors. In the following, the essay presents research results about how the Visegrád Cooperation appeared in the statements of the V4 countries’ prime ministers and presidents in office between 2004 and 2013, then it summarises the conclusion of a comprehensive research into post-accession V4 cooperation including the changing perceptions about the initiative. The research aimed to find the greatest possible number of publicly available, specifically Visegrad-related statements by the V4 countries’ prime ministers (hereafter: PM) and presidents in the period in question. After hundreds of statements broadly related to the Visegrád Group were gathered, statements suitable for research purposes were analysed from different aspects in order to prove the hypotheses (see introduction). Evidently, finding each and every relevant statement made by the examined actors since 2004 could not be the goal of the research; the aim was rather to be as representative as possible by finding sources in all categories, i.e. from every government term, from all four countries and from both “political families”. Fifty statements—including statements from almost all PMs and presidents, and statements from every year—were eventually analysed and the findings presented below reflect the content and characteristics of these.

*General findings*

The research did yield results, even though they were less spectacular than expected. The first goal was to find out whether statements about the V4 itself (its characteristics, significance, perspectives, etc.) were made by the

examined actors at all. The answer was positive, as statements meeting the research criteria have been found from nearly every actor examined, but to the question whether the statements constituted a “contiguous discourse” and thus gave grounds for talking about “Visegrád-rhetoric” as such, a negative answer was given. *There was no real high-level political discourse about the V4 itself, at least publicly*, meaning that the number of statements directly dealing with the nature, characteristics and prospects of the V4 was relatively very low. Moreover, the relevant statements were usually short and not very detailed. As regards the question whether V4-related statements suggested a consistent attitude or divergent attitudes to the Cooperation (optimism, pessimism/scepticism or neutrality), research showed that the *leaders’ communication about Visegrád did not involve strong or passionate statements, but was characterised by overall satisfaction or optimism as to the initiative’s importance, necessity and usefulness*. An apt summary by a Hungarian scholar was thus partly verified by research in the field of high politics: the V4 seems to have “many lukewarm supporters and only a few rock-solid enemies”.<sup>20</sup> The second part of this assessment was disproved: most of the statements were decisively positive about the results, necessity, significance and future prospects of the V4, and none was decisively negative, although there are slight differences between more and less enthusiastic opinions. The only negative statements or references to problems were connected to bilateral conflicts unrelated or only marginally related to the V4, as exemplified by disputes between the Hungarian and Slovak prime ministers.<sup>21</sup> In one case bilateral tensions were mentioned in the context of the V4’s successfulness: in a diplomatically worded statement, Slovakian PM Radičova in summer 2010 said that she found some steps of the Hungarian government “unusual”, with which Czech PM Petr Nečas agreed, saying “unilateral steps by the Hungarian government not only do not help improve bilateral relations, but the tension created may jeopardise common [V4] endeavours aimed at tackling the economic crisis”.<sup>22</sup> In the same context, Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán said that “Hungarian diplomacy could not be expected to be the main engine of cooperation” because of the conflicts but Hungary must remain part of the V4 which “met considerable demand”, acknowledging “with due humbleness” that there were debates.<sup>23</sup> In the Slovak–Hungarian relation, however, signs of rapprochement followed later: after meeting with his Slovak counterpart Robert Fico in summer 2013, Orbán talked about “opening a new chapter in the shared history of the two countries”, saying the relationship between the two states was based on “political and

personal trust". Fico was also hopeful that successful years were ahead, adding that "Central European countries should cooperate more closely than earlier".<sup>24</sup> Negative sentences (not statements evaluating the V4 negatively) have been made concerning the V4's institutionalisation and enlargement. For example, in a meeting between Czech president Miloš Zeman and his Slovak counterpart Ivan Gašparovič in 2013, Zeman stated he supported the V4's enlargement with Slovenia, but Gašparovič opposed that because conclusion had never been reached on the issue of enlarging the V4, a "reputed and important brand in Europe", which should rather continue cooperation in the traditional alignment.<sup>25</sup> Earlier, Slovak PM Fico had expressed the same opinion in 2007, saying that the V4 had "high political added value" so there was "no reason to enlarge it".<sup>26</sup>

Another research question was whether trends in V4-related political communication in the examined period were observable (increase or decrease in intensity, detailedness, etc.). It was found that *there had not been any spectacular change in the post-2004 period as regards content, style or frequency*. In individual cases, however, changes in Visegrád's acceptance were apparent, exemplified by the case of former Czech president Václav Klaus, who had been outspokenly critical and sceptic about Visegrád, but later became a moderate supporter. Klaus (in office first between 1992 and 1997) once considered the V4 to be an "artificial product of the West",<sup>27</sup> and he "openly opposed the concept of any such political grouping, preferring instead to focus exclusively on economic cooperation".<sup>28</sup> In as late as 2003 he called the V4 a "tenth rate initiative at best" from the Polish and Czech perspective, and said other organisations such as CEFTA were more important because they had concrete content and goals.<sup>29</sup> His views seem to have changed: in 2011 he appraised the twenty years of V4 cooperation and said that it had contributed to "strengthening the friendship" between the four countries.<sup>30</sup> Explaining his earlier views he stated that he was only "rejecting the idea of the V4 as a substitution for the countries' full-fledged membership of western institutions" because "western partners hesitated to promise EU and NATO membership" to the four countries, but after the EU-accession the V4 acquired a new foreign political dimension and permitted the formulation of joint interests and priorities as well as their promotion on the international level.<sup>31</sup> Another statement suggesting a change in perception about Visegrád's role was from Slovak PM Fico who said in 2013 that when he had first attended a V4 summit in 2006, it was "a formal meeting without proper content" but later

the cooperation was becoming increasingly pragmatic and rational, with the participating countries “making competent and important decisions” in the V4 framework.<sup>32</sup> In fact, these remarks refer to a general increase in the V4’s acceptance and also suggest that the cooperation is “maturing” both structurally and content-wise.

*Communication about the V4’s characteristics and  
successfulness*

Unlike scholarly works, the political leaders’ *V4-related statements in the examined period have not really attempted to define what the V4 was*, but descriptions about the V4’s characteristics, necessity and successfulness have often been made. Some clarifying statements were formulated about what the V4 was *not*. Czech PM Petr Nečas, for example, underlined that fears of a central European alliance within the EU were unfounded, and referred to the V4 as a “natural grouping of countries with similar interests based on their culture and history”.<sup>33</sup> In general, the actors examined spoke highly of the V4 and acknowledged its successfulness and necessity. Around the time of the V4 states’ EU-entry, several statements lauded the Cooperation’s role in achieving the important goal of accession, even though some are convinced that, had the Four been able to coordinate more successfully, accession conditions could have been much better.<sup>34</sup> There was wide agreement that the post-accession V4 should be maintained with an ever-renewed content; statements by Hungarian president Ferenc Mádl and his Czech counterpart Vladimír Špidla in 2004 (the V4 should continue cooperating and be adjusted to the new environment “based on common interest but also relying on natural relations stemming from a shared culture and history”, developed flexibly<sup>35</sup>) represented an approach shared by actors with various political backgrounds, from all four states. In the post-accession context, the tone of rhetoric remained to be positive: the V4 was described, among others, as successful, versatile and rich cooperation (Polish president Kwaśniewski, 2005), and a sound platform for the coordination of positions in numerous areas (Czech PM Petr Nečas, 2012), which represents high political added value (Slovak PM Fico, 2007). In the EU-context, the V4 was considered an exemplary cooperation project for the whole EU (Polish PM Donald Tusk, 2010). The importance of solidarity was referred to in several Visegrád-related statements.

It was expected that post-2004 V4-related communication of the leaders would frequently involve references to the V4's specialness and underlying (non-political) factors that facilitate or even predetermine cooperation. Although some statements did include such elements, overall, *the politicians' approach towards the Cooperation proved to be mostly practical, restrained, and focussed on objective interests and potential practical benefits of mutual cooperation rather than sentiment*. The exceptions included references to the V4's role in strengthening the "Central European region's identity", and the significance of this identity. For instance, Polish president Komorowski said in 2011 that the V4 contributes to creating a Central European identity which could help the V4 states "find their place in the EU"<sup>36</sup>. In this context, a strong statement was made in 2011 by former Hungarian president Pál Schmitt who said "regional cooperation had no alternative" and the Visegrád countries were in an "interdependent relationship from geographic, historical and economic aspects."<sup>37</sup> This interconnectedness, however, has been a less decisive element in the statements than expected.

### *Dividing lines in Visegrád-related rhetoric?*

The research also aimed to find if there were considerable stylistic or substantial differences between statements of the political leaders about Visegrád in the post-2004 period based on national belonging or political affiliation. During the history of Visegrád Cooperation, certain political actors have been expressly optimistic, while others have been, to put it mildly, sceptic about the V4. Strongly expressed individual opinions of leaders may occasionally have created the perception that there were "national V4 attitudes" influencing the level of engagement and activity of the respective state in the cooperation, and thus the future of the whole initiative. This perception is reflected by statements such as "Visegrád was often depicted in Bratislava [under Vladimir Mečiar's government] as either a Czech plot to re-establish control over Slovakia or a Hungarian plan to annex Slovak territory", or "Czech governments were also Visegrád-sceptics [...], they did not want V4 to overshadow their efforts and progress [...] and to be dragged backwards into some neutral post-communist zone."<sup>38</sup> While there obviously are disagreements among the leaders about particular issues of regional, European or global significance, the research aimed to found whether pro-Visegrád or anti-Visegrád attitudes are in correlation with national or political affiliation. As for national affiliation

(noting that statements which could be labelled Visegrád-sceptic in any sense have been very rare in the first place) it was found that *there were no significant differences between V4-related statements of the examined actors in the post-accession period connected to national belonging. Even though there are states that had been thought of as “traditionally” pro-Visegrád or Visegrád-sceptic, high-level Visegrád-related rhetoric after 2004 did not reflect these alleged differences.*

As regards politics, it has often been observed that the “volatility of the V4 countries is proving to be a fundamental weak point in their cooperation” because the “balance of seats in the individual parliaments can vary tremendously from one election to another”, and consequently “foreign policy focus and attitudes to the Visegrád Group can change after every election” which makes the initiative’s non-institutionalised character a possible problem.<sup>39</sup> Others rightly add that the cooperation’s dependence on domestic politics and the political cycles “has not changed the reality that in the end, the spirit of cooperation in the region outweighed the negativities.”<sup>40</sup> Hamberger offered a concrete example about attitudes to the V4 in the context of domestic (Hungarian) politics and wrote that, in political debates, conservatives “tended to favour strengthening the country’s commitment to the V4 platform” while the Left “tended to adopt more openly anti-Visegrád EU policies.”<sup>41</sup> Research found that, similarly to national belonging, political affiliation did not seem to determine the content or style of V4-related statements either. Overtly enthusiastic, moderately optimistic and cautious, restrained statements have been made by actors belonging to the political left and the right alike. (Cases when bilateral tensions were mentioned in the V4 context were also not connected to only one or the other side.)

### *The V4’s renaissance: expectations and rhetoric*

Discovering whether the V4’s alleged renaissance and new impetus after 2010 was apparent based on the actual communication of the four states’ leaders was also among the goals of the research. It was also examined whether V4-related rhetoric suggested an intention among the examined actors to start conceiving a vision or strategy for the V4, a step proposed and awaited by some scholars, and also whether any concrete proposals for such a vision were deductible from the statements. As mentioned in the introduction, many saw the election of governments commonly considered

as centre-right in 2010 as a turn giving new impetus to the Visegrád Cooperation, given that all four governments shared a similar agenda and believed they could “amplify their voice in Washington, Brussels, and within international organizations by acting in unison”.<sup>42</sup> It was also frequently underlined around that time that the importance of Central Europe would increase and the region’s possibilities would broaden due to the Polish and Hungarian EU presidencies, which would “provide greater opportunities for bringing their priorities forward.”<sup>43</sup> A demonstrative example was a high-sounding statement in a press release by the European People’s Party (EPP) group, saying “2011 will be shaped by Central Europe. Central Europe has shared interests, history and cultural affinity. The subsequent Hungarian and Polish Presidencies should assure that Central Europe is present not only geographically as the eastern flank of the EU but also as a political actor.”<sup>44</sup> Some authors claimed no less than the V4 countries were in a promising position because they still had the “vigour and dynamism” that mostly had “evaporated from the older member states”.<sup>45</sup>

The research has shown that, while mainstream V4-related statements had already been positive before the 2010 government changes, *the post-2004 period brought signs of the V4’s intensification in terms of political rhetoric as well*. This applies to statements that evaluated the V4 and also those dealing with the cooperation’s future. Hungarian PM Orbán explicitly stated that he saw the centre-right governments’ entering in office in 2010 as a sign of Central Europe’s renewal and that there was a “strong demand for building a system of Central European cooperation”.<sup>46</sup> Slovakian PM Iveta Radičová, one of the conservative or centre-right leaders elected in 2010, spoke about further intensifying the cooperation in the future; Polish PM Donald Tusk said Central Europe should set an example for the EU to “respond to challenges posed by the crisis with courageous reforms”<sup>47</sup> and also spoke, in general terms, about the importance of continued solidarity among the V4 states; Polish and Slovakian presidents Komorowski and Gašparovič also talked about the increasing significance of the V4 on the regional and the intra-EU level. However, it has to be added that political affiliation did not seem to be the only, or the most significant, factor behind the intensification: Robert Fico, incumbent Slovakian prime minister in office from April 2012, is a social democrat, and he is among the actors to whom several pro-Visegrád statements are attributable. In terms of rhetoric, a remarkable novelty since the V4’s alleged renaissance in 2010 is

the strong presence of a rhetorical line primarily represented by Viktor Orbán and his government about the exceptional potential of Central Europe to become the “engine of future European growth”, which is also said to necessitate closer regional cooperation by strengthening of the V4. Some statements of actors from the other three countries have also implied agreement with this message (but clearly it has primarily been Mr Orbán and Hungarian political figures who have been the most outspoken representatives of this idea).

In sum, the participating states’ political leaders, regardless of national and political belonging, have acknowledged and underlined in their own statements that the V4’s significance has been on the rise, and they have constantly committed themselves to further cooperation. As far as the expectations or proposals about creating some kind of vision for Visegrád are concerned, *however, the examination of rhetoric has not confirmed the presence of an intention among the V4 leaders to conceive a vision or strategy for the V4, regardless of the perceived increasing significance of regional cooperation. Consequently, rhetoric has not yet involved any concrete ideas in this respect.* It remains to be seen whether this will change in the longer run—which is, this essay argues, much more probable than it was a decade ago—but in the near future Visegrád will most probably remain focussed on a project- or issue-based flexible cooperation.

#### CONCLUSION: COOPERATION AS THE NORMAL STATE OF AFFAIRS IN CENTRAL EUROPE

Based on the comprehensive analysis about post-accession Visegrád Cooperation partly presented above, it is fair to say that today’s V4 is alive and well, having the potential to continue being a fundamental framework for regional cooperation in Central Europe. The initiative had not only survived the four states’ EU-accession but was revived and reinforced. It has proven since then that cooperation has become the standard state of affairs in Central Europe, even if the V4 is not all-encompassing and automatic, and is not a tool for eradicating bilateral problems (but in fact these have never been goals of the V4). As to successfulness in light of the minimum and optimum criteria introduced earlier, the V4 has definitely fulfilled the minimum requirement (cooperation structures were maintained and the participants have showed willingness to ensure regularity and produce input) in the post-2004 period, and the optimum requirement (cooperation

produces actual output, to the satisfaction of all four states) has also usually been met, with exceptions where diverging views have not enabled joint action.

As far as V4-related non-political perceptions are concerned, research showed that 1) many observers see the V4 as something more than a volatile platform for occasional exchange of opinion, 2) Visegrád has been surrounded by a sentimental supportive environment in the V4 elites (especially in the early phase), 3) there seems to be general agreement about Visegrád's increased significance after 2004 (supported by observations about the V4's elite-socialising effect and contribution to a pragmatic political Visegrád-identity), and 4) the perceived increase in significance and successfulness has contributed to a growing V4-awareness and also growing expectations, especially as regards intra-EU cooperation. Research about V4-related political statements in the post-accession period has yielded the following results. *The first hypothesis, which said there existed a rich and detailed Visegrád-related political discourse in the sense that the leaders often made statements about the V4 describing its "nature", "essence", importance, successfulness and other features, was disproved.* The low number of such statements (e.g. compared to statements related to concrete issues of cooperation) meant that politicians seemed to have a decisively practical approach to Visegrád. Second, it was expected that the statements examined were generally optimistic and enthusiastic about the V4 and often invoked sentimental factors like a sense of "togetherness" and "regional identity" in Central Europe, interpreting them as facilitators or even inevitable determiners of cooperation. This was only partly proved: *most of the statements were decisively positive about the results, necessity, significance and future prospects of the V4, and none was decisively negative, but V4-related communication did not involve very strong or passionate statements and only a few references to sentimental or non-tangible elements like some regional "fate" and identity-based interconnectedness were found.* Overall, the leaders' communication about Visegrád Cooperation has proved to be mostly practical and restrained, stressing objective interests and potential practical benefits of mutual cooperation. *The third hypothesis, saying there were substantial and/or stylistic dividing lines in the V4-related communication depending on the respective leaders' national and political affiliation, was also disproved.* Both optimistic/enthusiastic and more restrained/neutral statements have been made by actors belonging to the political left and the right alike, and

no link has been found between the content/style of communication and national belonging either. Fourth, it was expected that recent V4-related statements of the leaders confirmed a) the observation about the V4's increasing importance in its alleged renaissance since 2010, and b) the presence of a political intention to formulate some kind of long term vision for Visegrád, which is not yet accompanied by concrete proposals about the initiative's future role. This hypothesis was only partly proved: *while mainstream political statements about the V4's importance and prospects had already been decisively positive before the 2010 government changes, there have indeed been signs of an intensification in the most recent period, in terms of rhetoric as well. However, references to the necessity of some distinct, comprehensive vision or strategy for the V4's future (often brought up in scholarly works) have not been present in high-level political rhetoric. Consequently, no concrete proposals have been made in this respect.* However, the intention to continue and strengthen cooperation has been apparent, and statements mostly focussed on concrete areas and issues where increased future cooperation was desirable. In conclusion, the approach towards Visegrád is apparently positive in the post-EU-accession period, both in academic sources and political statements. Since neither external pressure (which had only been present before the EU-accession) nor popular expectations (which are absent due to low awareness) influence the decision makers towards depicting the V4 more successful and significant than it actually is, pro-Visegrád rhetoric reflects the politicians' true conviction. Consequently, no matter how low-profile it has been, *the V4 has significantly influenced the way of thinking of the Visegrád states' elites about the normal state of affairs in Central Europe towards seeing cooperation as natural and necessary.*

As to substance, Visegrád has proven to be an à la carte cooperation where the potential areas of common interest are rather generally indicated than "set in stone". The cooperation is indeed "flexible in its choice of topics and objectives, as well as the strategic tools to handle them",<sup>48</sup> and coordination and joint action only happens when the particular issue is of interest to all four V4 states, and when joint approach presumably benefits all countries more than individual approaches would. It is to a large extent mistaken to demand tangible results in the strict sense, which are distinctively V4-related. First, as mentioned earlier, the V4 is increasingly producing results that can be labelled tangible by any measure, and second, the impacts of cooperation are mostly long term "soft results". Visegrád cooperation can

actually be found “working »invisibly« in intra-VG networks at the nongovernmental level”,<sup>49</sup> and the micro- and macro-level networks of connections that emerged directly or indirectly because the V4’s activities can be regarded as one of the most important soft results. Although there is currently a favourable academic and political environment for cooperation, the future of the V4 might always be affected by unforeseeable events and/or logically presumable risks. The latter include potential flare-ups of bilateral tensions (e.g. in the Hungarian-Slovak relation) and the negligence of the cooperation framework either because of domestic politics or the international political/geopolitical ambitions of individual states (especially Poland’s middle-power aspirations and Weimar Triangle orientation). However, disagreement on particular issues is not among these risks, as unanimity in all matters is empirically not a requirement for Visegrád’s survival or effectiveness.

The lack of strategic priorities, seen as a problem in some scholarly works, may also pose an “existential threat” to the V4 (which is probably a reason why academics urge the creation of a long-term vision). However, it has to be taken into account that the V4 works different than an organisation with bidding, pre-set goals. Cooperation in the V4 context does not require a high-sounding and comprehensive concept or vision. Experience has shown that the cooperation structures that have organically emerged, along with a pragmatic approach to coordination and a rotating presidency structure that can be interpreted as a system of “fluid strategy-making and execution”, are capable of maintaining cooperation. Provided that expectations towards the V4 are realistic and follow the same practical approach the Cooperation itself does, Visegrád’s successfulness and acceptance is more than promising, and the actual participants of the cooperation seem to be increasingly aware of this.

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<sup>2</sup> STRÁŽAY, Tomáš. 2011 Visegrad—Arrival, Survival, Revival. In *Two Decades of Visegrad Cooperation: Selected V4 Bibliography*, ed. Břetislav Dančák et. al. 17. Bratislava: International Visegrad Fund.

<sup>3</sup> KRON, Robert. 2012 “Thoughts on the Visegrád Group: A View from the Potomac”. *Visegrad Revue* (online). Accessed December 10, 2013. <http://visegradrevue.eu/?p=656>

<sup>4</sup> LENČ, Marek. 2011 “Perspectives of Central Europe Cooperation within the European Union”. *Culturaldiplomacy.org* paper (online). Accessed December 10, 2013. <http://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/academy/content/pdf/participant-papers/2011/april/biec-roa-nua/perspectives-of-central-europe-cooperation-within-the-european-union-marek-lenc.pdf>

- <sup>5</sup> The “Sectoral Cooperation” section of the Selected V4 Bibliography, mentioned above, alone contains more than 450 pieces of literature, and this compilation was gathered over two years ago.
- <sup>6</sup> Visegrád Group. 2011 The Bratislava Declaration of the Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Visegrad Group. Accessed December 10, 2013. <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/2011/the-bratislava>
- <sup>7</sup> STRÁŽAY, Tomáš. 2013 “The Visegrád Group: In Search of a Vision”. *CEPA Central Europe Digest* (online). Accessed December 10, 2013. <http://www.cepa.org/content/visegr%C3%A1d-group-search-vision>
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- <sup>9</sup> We are not a political Masonic Lodge or anything of that kind” – said Czech Prime Minister Necas in 2010. Czech PM: Visegrad Group ‘not a Masonic Lodge’. 2010 Interview with Necas Petr, *EurActiv* (online). Accessed March 30, 2014. <http://www.euractiv.com/future-eu/czech-pm-visegrad-group-masonic-news-498186>
- <sup>10</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary. 2013 Megkezdte tevékenységét a fokvárosi Visegrád Ház [“Visegrad House in Cape Town opens”]. *Országos Sajtószolgálat (MTI)*, 26 March 2010. Accessed March 22, 2013. <http://os.mti.hu/hirek/61405/os-megkezdte-tevekenyseget-a-fokvarosi-visegrad-haz>
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- <sup>12</sup> An official chronology of selected V4 events with the related press releases is available on the Visegrad Group’s website at <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar>.
- <sup>13</sup> International Visegrad Fund. Webpage, section „About”, subsection „Basic facts”. Accessed March 22, 2013. <http://visegradfund.org/about/basic-facts/>
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> MARTONYI, János. 2003 “Hogyan tovább, Közép-Európa?” [“Whither Central Europe?”]. *Európai Utas*, Vol. 14, No. 2: 52.
- <sup>16</sup> DANGERFIELD, Martin. 2008 “The Visegrád Group in the Expanded European Union: From Preaccession to Postaccession Cooperation”. *East European Politics & Societies*, Summer 2008: 647.
- <sup>17</sup> IZSAK, Dániel. 2010 *Region in transit: the role of exogenous forces in the resurgence of the Visegrad Group (thesis)*. Budapest: Central European University, 17.
- <sup>18</sup> Quotations in the paragraph are from: HAMBERGER, Judit. 2010 “Közép-Európa politikai dimenziójának megvalósítási kísérlete: a visegrádi együttműködés (V4)” [“Visegrad Cooperation (V4): an attempt to realise Central Europe’s political dimension”]. *Külföldi Szemle*, 2010/1: 46.
- <sup>19</sup> Polish Presidency of the Visegrad Group. Executive Report on Polish Presidency in the Visegrad Group, July 2008 – June 2009: 21. Accessed January 21, 2014. <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/annual-reports/annual-report-pl-08-09>
- <sup>20</sup> BARÁTH, Gergely. 2011 Halász Iván (történész, jogász) a Visegrádi Együttműködésről – interjú [“Iván Halász (historian, jurist) about the Visegrád Cooperation – interview”]. *Terra Cognita* (online). Accessed January 21, 2014. <http://www.kibic.hu/hir/118/halasz-ivan-%28tortenesz--jogasz%29-a-visegradi-egyuttmukodesrol---interju>
- <sup>21</sup> For example, at a V4 meeting in 2006, Hungarian PM Gyurcsány and Slovakian PM Fico engaged shortly in a debate about why their planned bilateral meeting about bilateral issues did not take place.

- <sup>22</sup> Budapesten találkoztak a Visegrádi Négyek [“Visegrád Four meeting in Budapest”]. 2010 Editorial, *Kitekintő* (online). Accessed March 30, 2014. [http://kitekinto.hu/bem-rakpart/2010/07/20/budapesten\\_talalkoztak\\_a\\_visegradi\\_negyek/#.UzgeUfl\\_vz4](http://kitekinto.hu/bem-rakpart/2010/07/20/budapesten_talalkoztak_a_visegradi_negyek/#.UzgeUfl_vz4)
- <sup>23</sup> Orbán a V4-en: most éppen konfliktus van [“Orbán at the V4 summit: right now there is a conflict”]. *Világ gazdaság Online*, 20 July 2010. Accessed March 30, 2014. <http://www.vg.hu/kozelet/politika/orban-a-v4-en-most-eppen-konfliktus-van-322399>
- <sup>24</sup> MTI. 2013 “Orbán: új fejezet kezdődik Magyarország és Szlovákia közös történetében” [“Orbán: A new chapter begins in the shared history of Hungary in Slovakia”]. *Heti Válasz* (online), 2 July 2013. Accessed March 30, 2014. <http://hetivalasz.hu/itthon/uj-fejezetet-nyitnak-a-ket-oroszag-kozos-torteneteben-65683>
- <sup>25</sup> Zeman bővítené a V4-et Szlovéniával, Gašparovič viszont nem [“Zeman would enlarge the V4 with Slovenia, but Gašparovič would not”]. *Parameter* (online), 5 April 2013. Accessed March 30, 2014. <http://www.parameter.sk/rovat/belfold/2013/04/05/zeman-bovitene-v4-et-szloveniaval-gasparovic-viszont-nem>
- <sup>26</sup> STANKOVÁ, Michaela. 2007 “Gyurcsány: »There aren't two Schengens.«” *The Slovak Spectator* (online), 25 June 2007. Accessed March 30, 2014. <http://spectator.sme.sk/articles/view/28211/2/>
- <sup>27</sup> TEREM, Peter and MAREK, Lenč. 2011 “Central European Identity – Visegrad Group”. *Banská Bystrica, Matej Bel University* (online study). Accessed March 30, 2014. <http://www.fpvvmv.umb.sk/app/accountPropertiesAttachment.php?kernelUserID=ID&ID=2271>
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- <sup>29</sup> BÓTÖS, Botond. 2003 “Klaus a V4 helyett az S4-et népszerűsíti?” [“Klaus promotes S4 over V4?”]. *Magyar Nemzet Online*. Accessed March 30, 2014. <http://mno.hu/kulfold/klaus-a-v4-helyett-az-s4-et-nepszerűsiti-704661>
- <sup>30</sup> V4: Változatlanul hatékony a visegrádi együttműködés [“V4: cooperation continues to be effective”]. *Új Szó* (online), 8 October 2011. Accessed December 10, 2013. <http://uiszo.com/online/kulfold/2011/10/08/v4-valtozatlanul-hatekony-a-visegradi-egyuttmukodes>.
- <sup>31</sup> Czech News Agency (ČTK). 2010 “V4 to back Hungary, Poland's 2011 EU presidency's agenda, Klaus says.” *Prague Daily Monitor* (online), 8 November 2010. Accessed December 10, 2013. <http://praguemonitor.com/2010/11/08/v4-back-hungary-polands-2011-eu-presidencys-agenda-klaus-says>
- <sup>32</sup> Government of Hungary. 2013 A V4-ek kiállnak a nukleárisenergia-felhasználás mellett [“The V4 stand for the use of nuclear energy”]. Press release (online), 14 October 2013. Accessed March 30, 2013. <http://www.kormany.hu/hu/miniszterelnokseg/hirek/elo-kozvetites-a-visegradi-oroszagok-kormanyfoinek-sajtotajekoztatoja>
- <sup>33</sup> GEHRING, Hubert and KIRCHNER, Laura. 2012 “Between Common Interests and National Egotism – The Role and Potential of the Visegrád Countries in the EU”. *KAS International Reports* (online), 86. Accessed December 10, 2013. [http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas\\_31823-544-2-30.pdf?130828110606](http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_31823-544-2-30.pdf?130828110606)
- <sup>34</sup> Martonyi and others believed that the V4’s pre-accession dysfunctions were among the main reasons behind the accession conditions turning out worse than expected by the accession countries or the EU. (This was confirmed by the European Commission indicating that they had expected a more favourable final outcome from the acceding countries’ point of view.)

- <sup>35</sup> SCHILLINGER, Erzsébet. 2013 “Mádl Ferenc köztársasági elnök hivatalában fogadta Vladimír Spidla cseh miniszterelnököt” [“President Ferenc Mádl has received Czech president Vladimír Spidla in his office”]. Press release, *Government News Centre (Hírközpont)*, 2 September 2004. Accessed December 10, 2013. <https://hirkozpont.magyarorszag.hu/sajtokozlemenyek/keh20030606.html>
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- <sup>37</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>38</sup> BUGAJSKI, Janusz. 2011 “Visegrád’s past, present and future”. *Hungarian Review*, 2011/3.
- <sup>39</sup> GEHRING and KIRCHNER (2012): 83, quoting Vladimir Handl.
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- <sup>45</sup> PARKES, Roderick and SOBJÁK, Anita. 2013 “This is how the Visegrád Four can benefit from a global strategy”. *Budapest Telegraph* (online). Accessed March 20, 2014. <http://www.budapesttelegraph.com/news/392/this-is-how-the-visegrad-four-can-benefit-from-a-global-strategy>
- <sup>46</sup> Prime Minister’s Office, Hungary. 2010 “Közép-Európa megújult” [„Central Europe has been renewed”]. *Press release* (online). Accessed March 20, 2014. <http://www.kormany.hu/hu/miniszterelnokseg/hirek/kozep-europa-megujult>
- <sup>47</sup> 2010 V4 tuneup to up potential power. *The Budapest Times* (online). Accessed March 20, 2014. <http://budapesttimes.hu/2010/07/28/v4-tuneup-to-up-potential-power/>
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