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25 Years of the V4 as Seen by the Public

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This publication reflects the views only of the authors.

Methodological note

- Public opinion surveys in all V4 countries were conducted between May – July 2015.
- Samples are representative for the adult population (age 18+) in each V4 country.
- Sample size: - Czech Republic, N=1065
  - Hungary, N=1001
  - Poland, N=1000
  - Slovakia, N=1067
- Fieldwork was carried out by:

Stem, Czech Republic

Tárki, Hungary

Stratega, Poland

Focus, Slovakia

The project was supported by the International Visegrad Fund
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KEY FINDINGS

- The public opinion poll conducted in four countries of the Visegrad Group in the spring of 2015 showed that the highest level of awareness of the V4 and Visegrad cooperation is in Slovakia: 54% of Slovak respondents said they heard of the Visegrad Group and knew what it was about, compared to 37% of the Czechs, 26% of the Hungarians, and only 17% of the Poles. This fact reflects a strong interest of Slovak political representation in intense political cooperation within the V4 that can be "traced" back to the period when Slovakia struggled to return to the road of EU integration after the 1998 parliamentary elections.

- The current level of public awareness of the V4 can be compared with 2001. While in Slovakia it has remained almost unchanged, in Hungary and Poland it decreased considerably. In the Czech Republic, on the contrary, the proportion of those who have heard of the Visegrad Group slightly increased.

- The Visegrad cooperation is considered as meaningful and important by 70% of Slovaks, compared to about 50% of the Czechs and 40% of the Hungarians and the Poles. The V4 cooperation actually does not have any opponents in four Visegrad countries.

- According to respondents in all four countries, the most important is definitely the economic and trade cooperation, followed by defence and security cooperation, and representation and promotion of common interests in the European Union. The perception of importance of individual areas of cooperation clearly shows that Visegrad citizens focus mostly on the issues of economic and social development.

- The indicator of relations among V4 countries is mutual trust and the belief of the public that they can rely on the other country or nation. In a long term, the above-average level of trust is between the Czechs and the Slovaks – almost four fifths of respondents in the two republics trust the other country. As for the trustworthiness, in the eyes of the Slovak public the most trustworthy are the Czechs (78%), Austrians (49%), and Poles (40%), while Hungarians took only the ninth place (30%). The strongest level of trust towards other V4 countries can be observed in Poland, where they occupied top three positions on the scale of trustworthiness: Slovaks ranked first with 69%, followed by the Czechs (61%), and Hungarians (61%). In the eyes of the Czech public, the most trustworthy were the Slovaks (79%) and French (59%), followed by Poles, Britons, and Austrians (58% each), while the Hungarians with 37% took the

ninth place. Hungary is the only V4 country, where the public shows the highest level of trust towards the country outside the Visegrad Group – Germany (62%). Poland ranks second (58%), while the Czech Republic and Slovakia (40% both) share the fourth and the fifth places.

- In the long term, the Visegrad countries differ in their attitude towards the United States and Russia. Although all being the NATO members, they trust the key country of the Transatlantic Alliance to a different extent. The highest degree of trust towards the United States is in Poland (50%), the lowest one in Slovakia (27%). The Polish public feels the highest level of distrust towards Russia; on the contrary, Slovaks feel the highest level of trust.

- An important part of the survey was to study the intensity scale of mutual contacts (of touristic, commercial, consumer, and cultural character) among the inhabitants of individual countries of the Visegrad Group. Here too the above-standard relations between Czechs and Slovaks are vital – 43% of Slovaks said they had a family member in the Czech Republic, and one fifth of Czechs have relatives in Slovakia. When asked about friends, the proportions were even higher – 62% of Slovak respondents have friends among the Czechs, and 59% of Czechs have friends among Slovaks. The dense network of relations, inherited from the period of common Czechoslovak state, and further expanded and deepened after 1993, creates conditions for other positive evaluations, for instance in case of the mutual trust.

1. INTRODUCTION

On 15th February 2016 the Visegrad Group celebrated the 25th anniversary of its establishment. Yet, in 1991, only two years after the fall of a totalitarian regime, hardly anyone expected this project of a regional cooperation to survive quarter-century as well as Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia to successfully complete the transformation of society and take an important place in the system of international relations.

The Visegrad cooperation was formed in 1991 at a meeting of the President of the Czechoslovak Republic, Václav Havel, the President of the Republic of Poland, Lech Walesa, and the Prime Minister of the Republic of Hungary, József Antall. The meeting took place at the Visegrad Castle in northern Hungary, which has a strong symbolic meaning. In 1335, about 650 years earlier, then rulers of Central Europe, Charles I of Hungary (Charles Robert), Casimir III, King of Poland, and John of Luxembourg, King of Bohemia, met here to discuss the possibilities of cooperation. Since its establishment, the Visegrad cooperation has seen many rises and falls; first the V3 turned into the V4, later all four countries joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and the European Union, and today they keep moving forward, no matter how difficult and complicated is the process of democratic consolidation. In the eyes of the outside world, the Visegrad cooperation is an exemplary model of regional cooperation, which is a guarantee of stability and good neighbourly relations to the rest of the world. However, recently V4 countries have displayed insufficient preparedness to accept migrants and integrate them in their societies. As a result, the V4 is facing new challenges in terms of both the mutual interactions and the relations with the European Union.

Over the last 25 years, there were several dark scenarios regarding the future of this remarkable format of regional cooperation. The mutual relations of the V4 member states and their relations with the outside world have been affected by different events. Yet, despite all turbulences, the Visegrad cooperation has survived and keeps going. The Visegrad dimension penetrated the foreign policy of four countries so deeply that it was not weakened even by lack of formal organisational or political structures of cooperation.

The meaning of the Visegrad cooperation is based mostly on a common destiny of four nations that were parts of different states in the past, but today they live side by side as sovereign democratic states whose security is guaranteed by the Euro-Atlantic community.

The formation of the Visegrad Group contributed to the enhanced stability in Central Europe, and deepened cooperation among Central European states in the areas such as education, culture, science, environment, fight against organised crime, regional development, civil society development, transport, etc. This format of regional cooperation facilitated the integration efforts of its member states. Advocating the

regional cooperation and supporting each other in the effort to gain the EU membership, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary significantly increased their chances of being admitted to the EU.

Common interests of Central European countries are not a pure cliché. They are very real, and Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary are fully aware of that. This does not mean that national interests of every V4 country necessarily correspond to the interests of the V4 as a whole; however, there are many areas of overlapping interests. An example from recent past can serve as a good illustration: in the 1990s, when Slovakia was excluded from the group of countries included in the first wave of NATO enlargement as a result of inner political problems, its Visegrad neighbours tried their best to help Slovakia to gain NATO membership and join the European Union. The Euro-Atlantic integration was in the interest of both Slovakia and the V4 as a whole.

The Visegrad Group is based mainly on a political cooperation. But what do the citizens of particular countries think about it? Do they actually know what the Visegrad Four is? What they believe to be their common interests? How do they perceive each other? To what extent they trust each other? What is the intensity of their mutual interactions? The answers to these questions, which represent an important dimension of inner cohesion of the Visegrad Group at the level of general public, can be found in the research project "Perception of the Visegrad cooperation in V4 countries", conducted in 2015 on the initiative of and with financial support from the International Visegrad Fund.

The project was coordinated by the Institute for Public Affairs in Bratislava. The data from a representative sample of adult population of the four countries were gathered by the following research agencies: STEM (Czech Republic), Tárki (Hungary), Stratega Market Research (Poland), and FOCUS (Slovakia). The current project is a follow-up to similar public opinion polls conducted in all V4 countries in 2001, 2003, and 2011[1].

[1] The research findings have been published in several academic as well as media outputs, for instance Oľga Gyárfášová et al., *Visegrad Citizens on the Doorstep of the European Union*, Bratislava, Institute for Public Affairs 2003; Oľga Gyárfášová, "Mental map of the V4 group or how do we perceive each other?", in *Internal Cohesion of the Visegrad Group*, Bratislava, VEDA 2013, pp. 100-111.

2. PUBLIC AWARENESS OF THE V4 COOPERATION AND PERCEPTION OF ITS IMPORTANCE

Respondents' views of foreign policy issues reflect, more than anything else, the opinions and statements of political representations as well as the presence of these issues in media and public discourse. It is not surprising, therefore, that the strongest awareness of existence of the Visegrad Four and the Visegrad cooperation is in Slovakia, where the political awareness of the V4 importance has been strongest in the long term. Fifty-four per cent of Slovaks said they heard of the Visegrad Group and knew what it was about, compared to 37% of the Czechs, 26% of the Hungarians, and only 17% of the Poles (Graph 1). This fact reflects the keen interest of Slovak political representation in intense political cooperation within the V4 that can be "traced" back to the period when Slovakia struggled to return to the road of EU integration after the 1998 parliamentary elections. Back then intense relations within the Visegrad Group became part of a "catching up" strategy and elimination of integration deficits caused by the government of Vladimír Mečiar. The awareness of the Visegrad Group in other three countries is considerably lower, with the Polish citizens being the least aware of the V4's existence. Apart from a political dimension, the awareness of the V4 in Slovakia also has geographical and geopolitical dimensions: Slovakia is the only country sharing borders with all other Visegrad countries and at the same time it is the smallest country within the group. Moreover, the International Visegrad Fund, the only "brick and mortar" institution of the V4 cooperation has a seat in Bratislava. Therefore it is only natural that Visegrad has been perceived as an important frame of reference.

The comparison of the level of public awareness of the V4 in 2015 and 2001 reveals interesting trends. While in Slovakia the level of public awareness of the V4 has remained almost unchanged, i.e. the highest in the Visegrad Group, in Hungary and Poland it decreased considerably. In the Czech Republic, on the contrary, the proportion of those who have heard of the Visegrad Group slightly increased.

The decreased level of public awareness of the V4 in Poland and Hungary may have different reasons. Compared to its partners within the Visegrad Group, Poland is a regional power, a key political actor, and the Poles can feel that they are in a different league. In the past, the destiny of Polish nation and Polish statehood directly depended on the development of relations between Poland on one hand, and Germany and Russia on the other hand (as well as on mutual relations between the two states). The public views of state's foreign policy have been definitely shaped by the attitudes of a significant proportion of Polish political and cultural elite, which attach special importance to the interaction of Poland and the two countries with respect to Poland's current position. Another influential factor can be the current global events with active participation, be it positive or negative, of Germany and Russia. The two countries have recently become visible mainly in connection with Russia-Ukraine conflict – Russia as

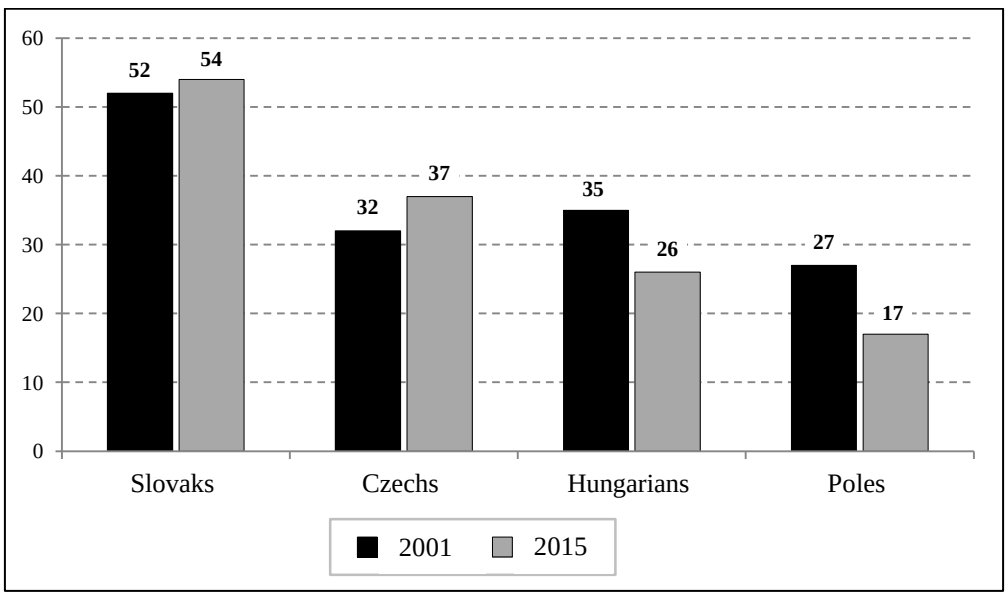
an aggressor, and Germany as a proponent of Western Europe's firm stance on Russian aggression.

In Hungary, the decrease in the level of public awareness of the V4 might have been caused by inner political changes and foreign policy priorities other than those relating to Central Europe. A common denominator of the decreasing trend in the two countries can be the feeling of reduced relevance of the V4 compared to the period when the countries joined their forces to cope with individual milestones of European integration and the common action within the region represented an added value.

A different case represents the Czech Republic. In the mid-1990s the Czech society basked in the EU's favourable approach, relishing its "star pupil of integration" title. Václav Klaus, as a Prime Minister and later also as a President of the Czech Republic, repeatedly labelled Visegrad cooperation as an obsolete concept. Today, the situation is quite different. The Czech political elite's revived interest in cooperation within the V4 format is clear, which is reflected in the support of the general public.

The aforementioned comparison shows that the public awareness of the Visegrad cooperation and the perception of its importance can change easily; it is not given once and forever. The views of citizens respond, to a certain extent, to a broader range of global events and reflect current political preferences. Political elites must never stop trying to enhance the public awareness and interest.

Graph 1: "Have you heard about a group of countries, called Visegrad Four?" (in %)

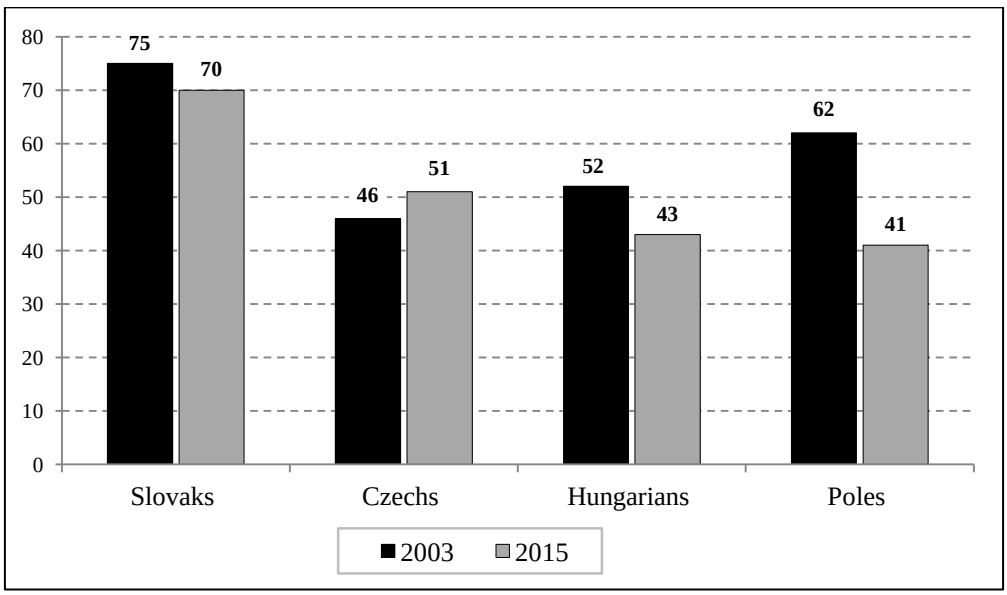


Source: IVF 2001, 2015.

The differentiated level of conviction on the importance of regional cooperation can also be seen in answers to other questions. The Visegrad cooperation is considered as meaningful and important by 70% of Slovak respondents, compared to about 50% of the Czechs and 40% of the Hungarians and the Poles. Although the total level of meaningfulness differs from the level of public awareness of the V4, Slovakia seems to be the strongest advocate of the Visegrad cooperation. The overall result is very positive too. Moreover in V4 countries the Visegrad cooperation actually does not have any opponents.

Like the public awareness of the Visegrad Group, the assessment of importance of regional cooperation too reflected shifts in time. While Slovakia has kept the first position in the proportion of respondents considering the V4 cooperation as important, the importance of the V4 cooperation in Poland and Hungary declined, in Poland by 21 percentage points. On the other hand, Czech public is more favourable to the V4 cooperation than 12 years ago (Gyárfášová et al., 2003).

Graph 2: "Cooperation among the Visegrad Group countries started at the beginning of the 1990s. Do you feel that the Visegrad Group is still important and has a mission to fulfil?" (responses "definitely yes + rather yes," in %)



Source: IVF 2003, 2015.

These data can be complemented with findings of other surveys concerning Slovakia. In the CEPI survey conducted in February 2016[2] the respondents were asked to list three countries that they would like to see as the closest partners of Slovakia. The majority (two thirds) of respondents preferred the Czech Republic as the closest ally. Historical and cultural closeness of the Czech Republic to the Slovak Public (and vice versa) has also been confirmed by findings of other surveys[3].

The Czech Republic was followed by three neighbouring states: Austria (37%), Poland (35%), and Hungary (32%). The respondents also stated Germany (32%) and Russia (29%).[4] In this connection, the most surprising is a relatively favourable position of Hungary, as in the 1990s Hungary was largely perceived as a source of possible threat. This change is connected mostly with the decline of anti-Hungarian nationalism in Slovakia linked with the establishment of a new state, inner struggle for Slovakia's direction, and activities of radical nationalistic political forces.[5]

The same survey also explored the attitudes of Slovak public towards the European Union, NATO, the United Nations, and V4. Most positively evaluated was the V4 regional platform, even better than the non-controversial UN, or generally positively perceived European Union. The most ambivalent and critical expectations are connected with the NATO membership.

For comparison, let us have a look at the views of foreign policy community in the V4 countries identified by the project *Trends of Visegrad Foreign Policy*.[6] The respondents (civil servants, politicians, foreign policy experts, researchers, journalists, business representatives) in all four countries consider the V4 membership important for promoting their national interests. Though the level of positive assessment among foreign policy communities is less differentiated than among the general public, the overall positive attitude is identical.

Which areas are regarded by the public as the most important for regional cooperation? In all four countries it is definitely the economic and trade cooperation (emphasized especially by Czech and Slovak respondents), followed by defence and security cooperation, and representation and promotion of common interests in the European Union. The perception of importance of individual areas of cooperation clearly shows that Visegrad citizens focus mostly on the issues of economic and social development.

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[2] For more details see Milan Šuplata, *Geopolitical confusion in Central Europe, 2016*, available at: http://www.cepolicy.org/publications/geopolitical-confusion-central-europe

[3] Zora Bútorová and Pavla Tabery, *Dvadsaťpäť rokov od Nežnej revolúcie očami občanov Slovenskej republiky a Českej republiky*, október 2014, available at: http://www.ivo.sk/7551

[4] Milan Šuplata, *Geopolitical confusion in Central Europe, 2016.*

[5] While in 1996 as many as 40% of Slovak respondents regarded Hungary as the country no. 1 that might present threat to Slovakia, in 2014 the proportion dropped to 5%. For more information see Miroslav Bahna, *Krajiny kultúrne najpodobnejšie a krajiny pre Slovensko nebezpečné. Čo sa zmenilo v období 1996 – 2014?* Sociologický ústav SAV 2015, available at: http://www.sociologia.sav.sk/cms/uploaded/2172_attach_1_krajiny_podobne_a_krajiny_nebezpecne.pdf

[6] Vít Dostál, *Trendy zahraničnej politiky krajín V4*. AMO, CEPI 2015.

At the time of data collection (spring of 2015), the migration crisis has not been the top priority yet, but one can assume that this topic would have had the influence on the prioritisation of cooperation areas.

Table 1: "In your opinion, what are the most important areas of the Visegrad cooperation? Choose three that you find most important." (in %)

	Czechs	Hungarians	Poles	Slovaks
Economic and trade cooperation	67	53	53	66
Defence and security cooperation	45	37	38	44
Representation and promotion of V4 common interests in the EU	44	39	27	40
Cooperation on transport and energy infrastructure development	34	27	21	37
Cross-border regional cooperation	27	28	22	36
Cooperation in foreign policy issues, e.g. relations to the Eastern Partnership countries	27	30	20	27
Cultural and scientific cooperation	18	22	30	22

Source: IVF 2015.

It is worth mentioning that a considerable part of respondents think that the most important areas should be the cooperation in foreign policy issues including the relation to the Eastern Partnership countries. Launched in May 2009, the Eastern Partnership is a joint initiative involving the EU, its Member States and six countries of the former Soviet Union – Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. It was proposed by Poland (together with Sweden) during the Czech presidency of the EU Council. The aim of the initiative is to create an organisational framework for strategic partnership between the EU and the aforementioned countries in the area of political, economic and trade cooperation. Key issues of programme implementation include democracy, the rule of law, human rights, market economy, good governance, and sustainable development. The initiative is aimed at creating conditions for signing association agreements with the European Union. In case of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia the goal has already been achieved, as the three countries signed Association Agreements with the EU in June 2014.

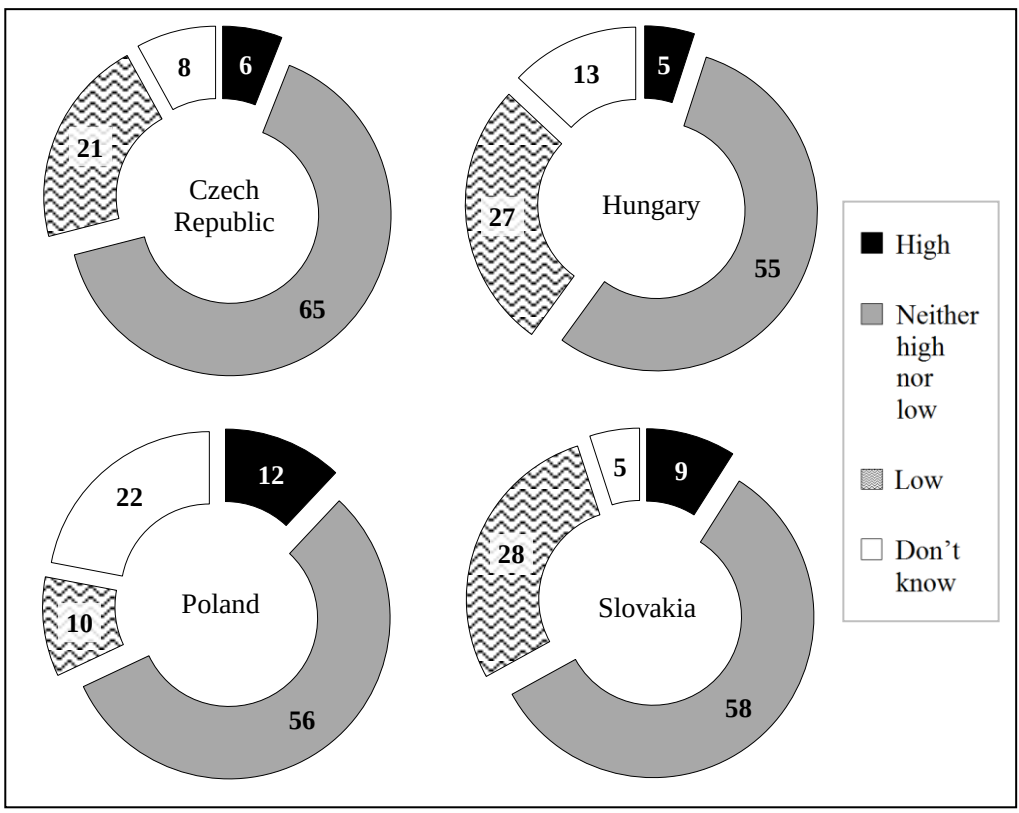
Due to their common past, the V4 countries could play a key role in the achievement of goals set by the Eastern Partnership initiative. They are close neighbours, they have rich experiences in implementing reforms and participating in the process of European integration (they can provide very useful positive and negative experiences). New EU Member States still remember that they managed to successfully complete the transformation process only with the assistance of democratic West, and many people therefore feel that they now have an obligation to help countries, which have so far been less successful in transformation. Central European countries have always supported the principle of EU open door policy. Many non-governmental organisations in Central Europe have rich experience in supporting democratic forces in the Eastern Partnership countries, which is something they should definitely keep doing. The slogan "*For our freedom and yours*" has not lost its relevance; it is still a key slogan of solidarity of democrats in Central and Eastern Europe. The support of Visegrad citizens for European aspirations of the Eastern Partnership countries can be very instrumental.

3. IMAGES ABOUT US AND THE OTHERS

The survey explored how the general public perceives different aspects of development in their own country and with "the others" in three different dimensions: the willingness of individual countries to cooperate within the V4 framework; the standard of living of ordinary people (people like you), and the level of democracy the country has achieved.

At first, let's have a look at how the citizens of V4 countries assess the conditions in their home countries. Two thirds of Czechs believe that the living standard of ordinary people in their country is neither high nor low, while one fifth regard it as low and only 6% as high. The highest proportion of a critical assessment, i.e. "the standard of living of people like me is low," can be observed in Slovakia (28%) and in Hungary (27%). On the contrary, only 10% of Polish respondents believe that the standard of living in their country is low (Graph 3).

Graph 3: Living standard of people like you. Public views of their own countries (in %)



Source: IVF 2015.

With regard to the level of democracy achieved by their country, the most critical are the Hungarians with one third of respondents evaluating the level of democracy achieved by their country as low. They are followed by Slovaks (28% of responses "low"), Czechs (18%), and the least critical Poles (11%).

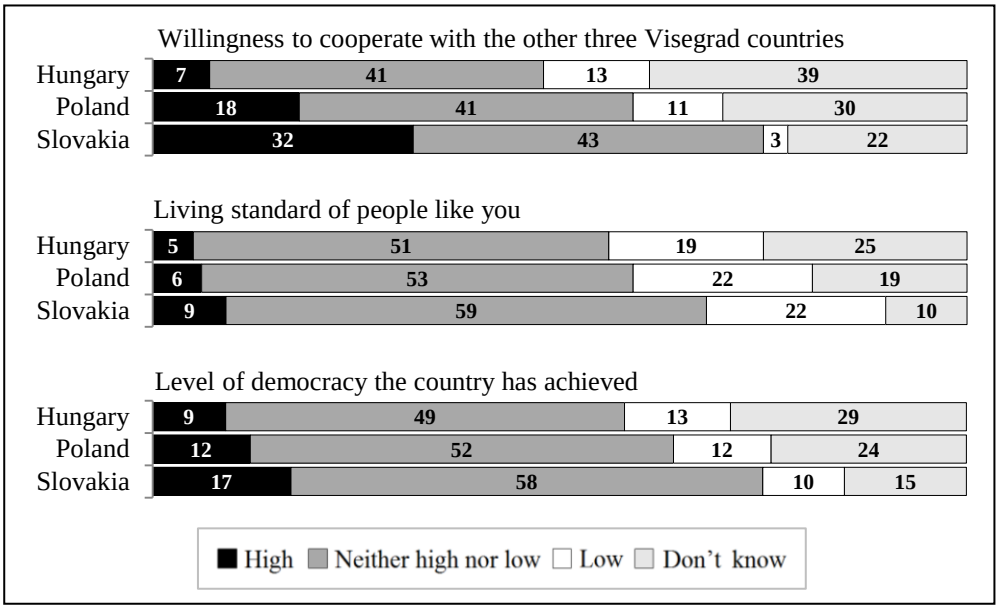
When evaluating the others, "don't know" answer is rather frequently used. In Poland, 40% of respondents were unable to assess the standard of living of ordinary people in the Czech Republic, Hungary or Slovakia, and a similar proportion of people chose "don't know" option when they assessed other two dimensions: willingness to cooperate and the level of democracy. The high proportion of "don't know" answers also appeared in the Czech Republic in relation to Hungary, and in Hungary in relation to Poland.

As for the willingness to cooperate, Slovakia achieved the best score – from both Czech and Slovak respondents. Hungarian public ranked Poland first, while Polish respondents stated their own country. Inhabitants of Poland and Slovakia believed that their country is the most willing to cooperate.

While the citizens in all countries believe that their own country is the most willing to cooperate, when it comes to the assessment of the living standard of ordinary people or of the level of democracy a different pattern can be observed: the conviction that "the others" live richer and more democratic lives. This is most visible in the perception of the Czech Republic by respondents in Slovakia: 56 % of Slovaks believe that the standard of living of ordinary people in the Czech Republic is higher than in their country. In case of some respondents, this opinion can be based on rather good knowledge of socio-economic situation in the neighbouring country with similar language and culture, on personal experience gained during their visits to and longer study stays or work stays in the Czech Republic, or on information provided by Czech media available in Slovakia. The Czech Republic is regarded as the "better off" in terms of the standard of living also in Poland and Hungary, however, the proportion of those who share this opinion is considerably lower than in Slovakia (about 15%). The Czechs are the only ones who do not think that the standard of living of ordinary people is higher in the Czech Republic. At the same time, however, they do not think that the situation in other countries is better (Graphs 4a-d).

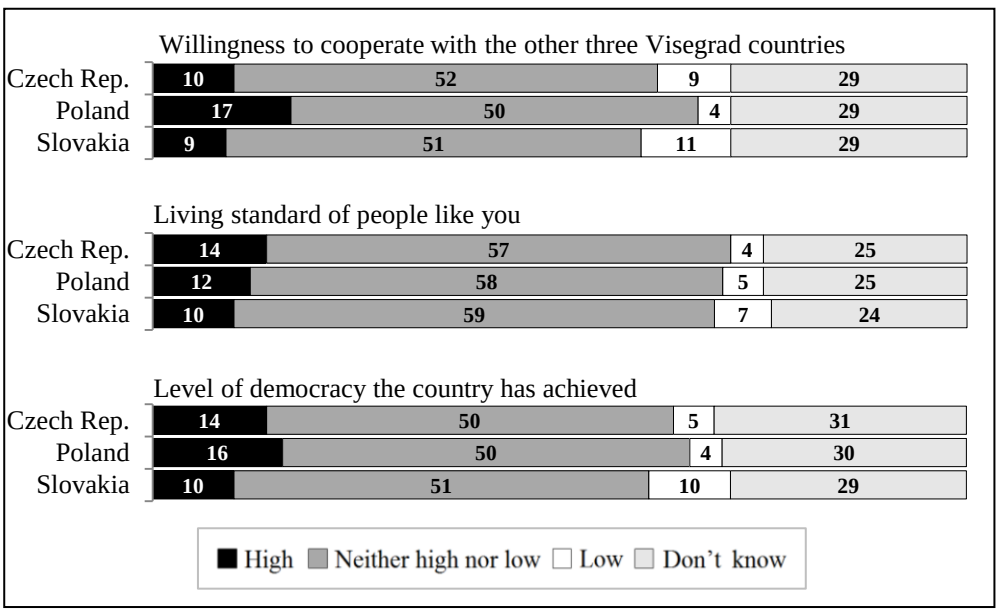
Similar findings have been observed in case of the level of democracy – Slovak public speaks highly of the level of Czech democracy, Czech respondents evaluate highly the level of Slovak democracy, and Hungarians believe that the highest level of democracy can be found in Poland. Only the Polish citizens feel that "their" level of democracy is higher than in other countries.

Graph 4a: Citizens of the Czech Republic evaluate the others (in %)



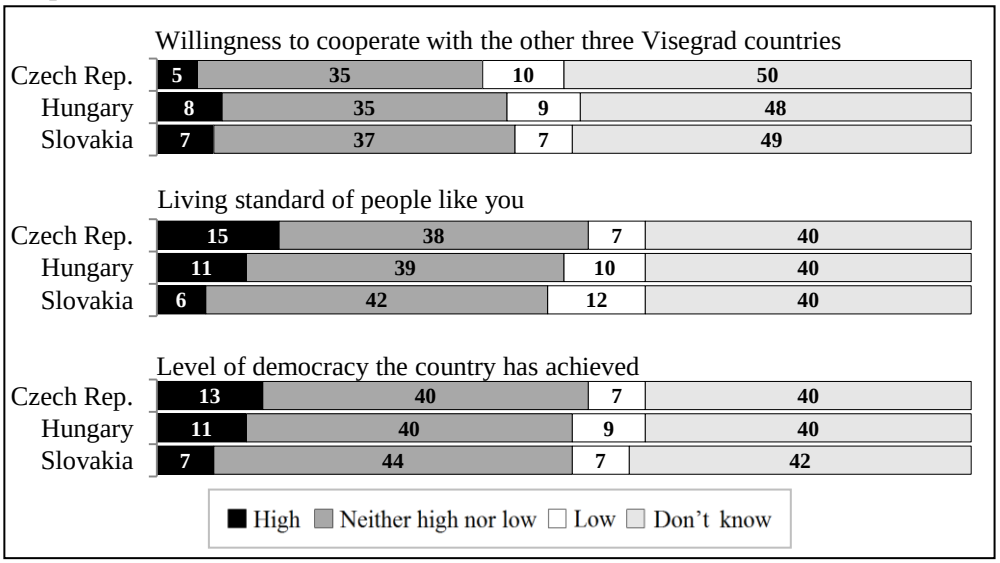
Source: IVF 2015.

Graph 4b: Hungarian citizens evaluate the others (in %)



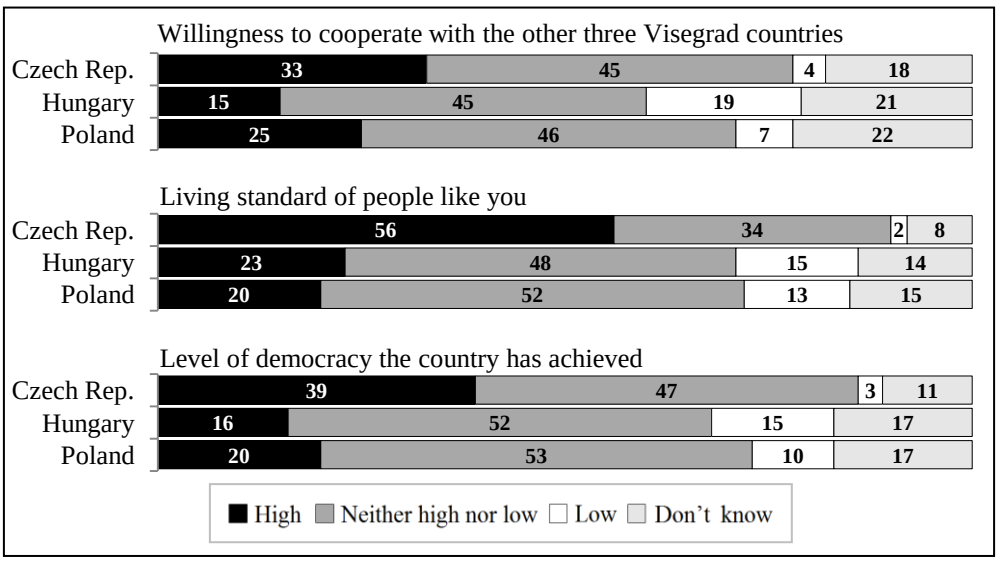
Source: IVF 2015.

Graph 4c: Polish citizens evaluate the others (in %)



Source: IVF 2015.

Graph 4d: Slovak citizens evaluate the others (in %)



Source: IVF 2015.

The majority of respondents create the image of the others based on secondary information. As we will show later, the frequency of personal contacts and first-hand information is rather low. Obviously, the image of the others is influenced also by the extent of information provided by the media. The only exception is a strong communication link between the Czech Republic and Slovakia, but other links seem to be used to a lesser extent.

4. MENTAL MAP OF THE VISEGRAD GROUP

The simplest indicator of mutual relations among V4 countries (and their relations to other states) is trust and the feeling of the public that they can rely on the other country.

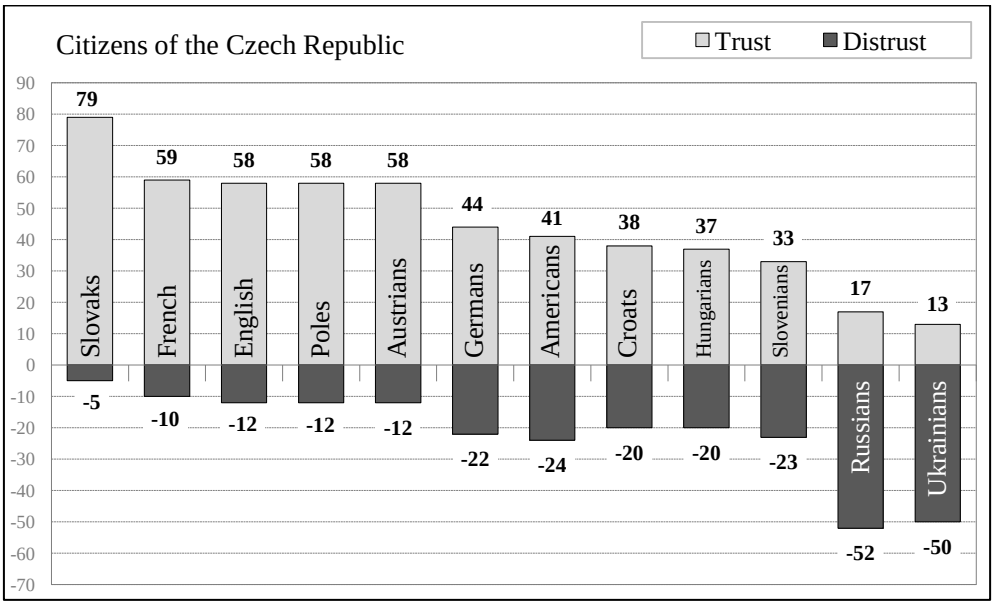
The strongest level of trust towards other V4 nations can be observed in Poland, where they occupied top three positions on the scale of trustworthiness: Slovaks ranked first with 69%, followed by the Czechs (61%), and Hungarians (61%). Within the Visegrad "sociogram of trust" the highest level of trust is between the Czechs and the Slovaks – almost four fifths of respondents in the two republics trust the other country. Over the last few years, the closeness of the Czech Republic to the Slovak public (and vice versa – closeness of Slovakia to the Czech public) has also been proved by other surveys[7]. In Slovakia, the most trustworthy are the Czechs (78%), Austrians (49%), and Poles (40%), while Hungarians took only the ninth place (30%).

In the Czech Republic, the ranking is quite different: the Slovaks (79%) and French (59%) are followed by Poles, Britons and Austrians (58% each), while the Hungarians with 37% took the ninth place. Hungary is the only V4 country, where the public shows the highest level of trust towards the country outside the Visegrad Group – Germany (62%). Poland ranks second (58%), while the Czech Republic and Slovakia (40% both) share the fourth and the fifth places (Graphs 5a–d).

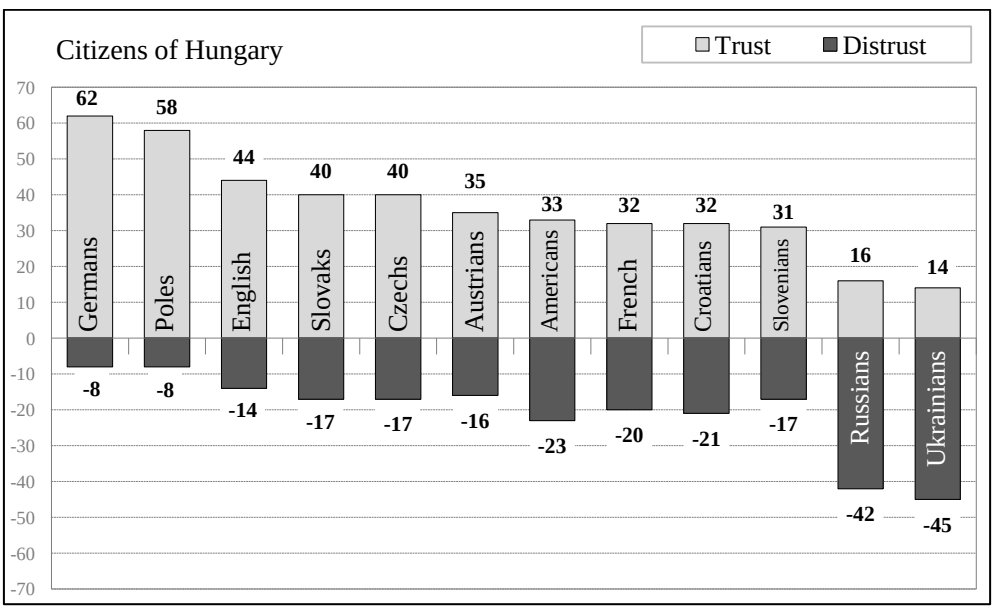
In general, the level of trust among the V4 inhabitants is rather high. Even the Slovak-Hungarian relations, formerly the "Achilles' heel" of the Visegrad cooperation, have never been better. While in 2011 only 16% of Hungarians trusted Slovaks, in 2015 this proportion increased to 40%. A slight improvement can also be seen in Slovakia, where the share of those who trust Hungarians increased from 26% to 30% in the same period. Slovak public still takes a more reserved attitude towards Hungary compared to other countries; however, based on the aforementioned indicators, this wariness seems to be weakening. The mutual perception of Slovaks and Hungarians have also been positively influenced by the fact that despite ideological differences and previous experiences, burdened with tension and confrontation, the current ruling parties – Smer-SD (Direction – Social Democracy) in Slovakia and Fidesz in Hungary – managed to establish and maintain correct and trouble-free pragmatic relations.

[7] ISSP research, October 2014. For more information see http://www.sociologia.sav.sk/cms/uploaded/2172_attach_1_krajiny_podobne_a_krajiny_nebezpecne.pdf and CEPI research, February 2016, available at http://www.cepolicy.org/publications/geopolitical-confusion-central-europe

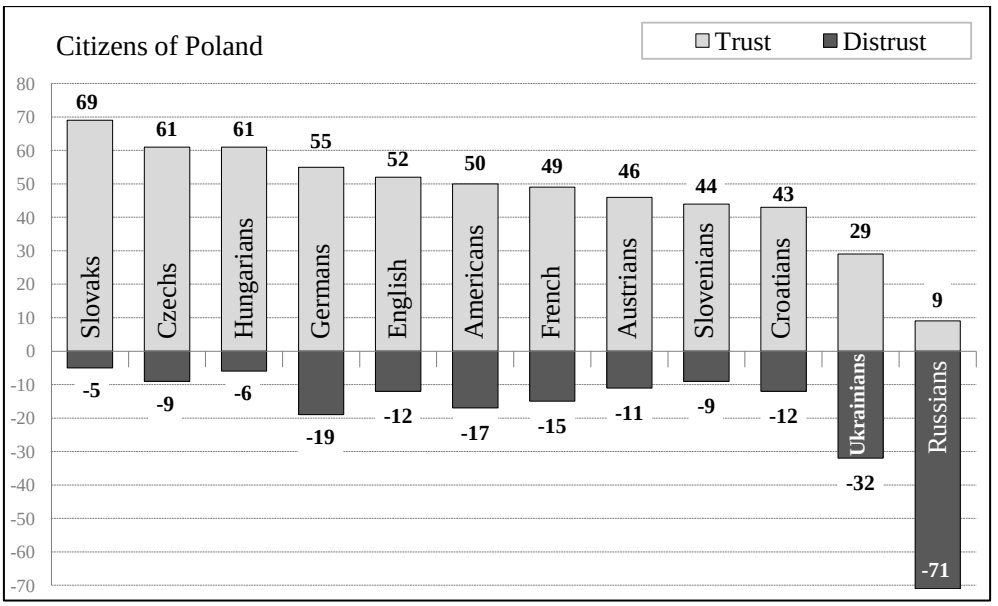
Graphs 5a–d: "To what extent can we trust and rely on the following nations?" (responses "definitely trust + rather trust" and "rather distrust + definitely distrust" are merged, without neutral responses "neither trust nor distrust" and "don't know", in %)



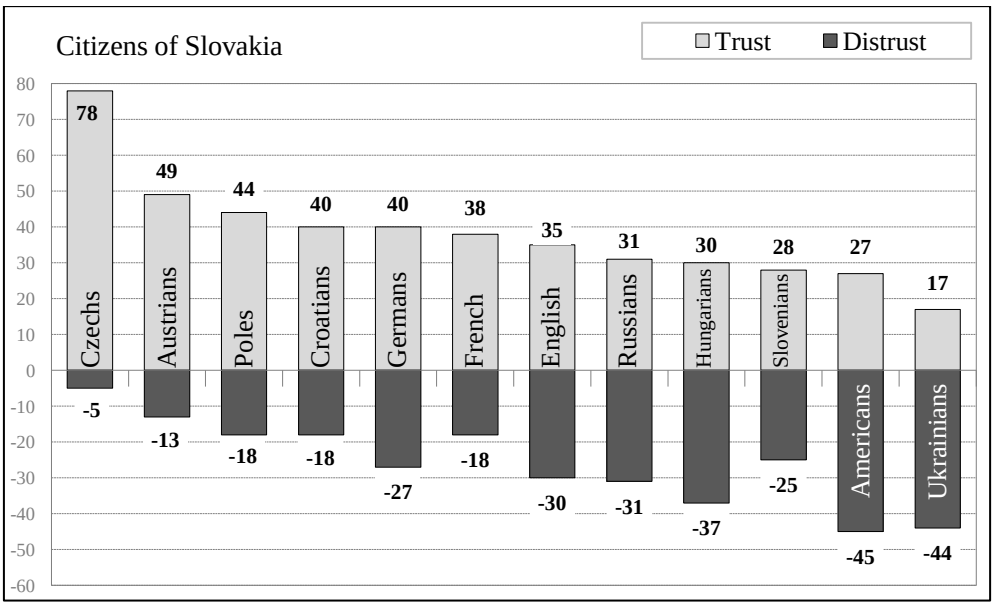
Source: IVF 2015.



Source: IVF 2015.



Source: IVF 2015.



Source: IVF 2015.

5. PARTNERS AND ALLIES OUTSIDE THE VISEGRAD GROUP

Apart from the V4 countries, the inhabitants in these countries trust their significant Central European neighbour, Austria. In the list of trustworthy countries Austria is followed by Germany, the United Kingdom, and France. For a long time, the V4 countries have had different attitudes towards Russia. Poles feel the highest degree of distrust of Russia; on the contrary, the Slovaks feel the highest degree of trust. While in Poland the distrust towards Russia is deeply rooted in historical experiences and encouraged by the current political discourse, Slovaks perceive Russia in a more positive way despite their bad experiences – for instance the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact armies in August 1968 and the subsequent twenty-year-long Soviet occupation and devastating normalisation that cut short the reform processes launched by the Prague Spring, and brought political repression of a considerable part of population. Based on the findings of other surveys, however, one can state that Slovak society does not include a substantial part of population supporting the current policy of Putin's Russia[8].

The Visegrad countries also vary in their attitude towards the United States. Although all of them are NATO members (the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland since 1999, Slovakia since 2004), they trust the key country of the Transatlantic Alliance to a different extent. The highest degree of trust towards the United States is in Poland (50%), the lowest one in Slovakia (27%), where less people trust the United States than Russia (Graphs 5a–d). In the Czech Republic, 41% of inhabitants trust the United States, while in Hungary it is 33%. In general, the citizens of V4 countries trust the United States more than they trust Russia, with Slovakia being the only exception (Graphs 5a-d).

The low level of trust towards the United States, which sets Slovakia apart from other V4 countries, can be interpreted as a result of a wide range of historical, ideological, socio-cultural and socio-economic factors, which shaped the public opinion in favour of Russia. These factors include attitudes of some representatives of nineteenth-century national intellectual elite (Ľudovít Štúr, Svetozár Hurban Vajanský), leftist intellectuals in the inter-war period, and Slovak communists in the period of 1948 – 1989. The proponents of inclination towards Russia pointed out mainly the ethnic, national, cultural and language elements, stressing the mutual closeness of Russians and Slovaks as Slavonic nations. In the first half of the twentieth century Štúr's Russophile message was brought back to life by the DAV group, the association of leftist intellectuals who advocated the inclination of Slovakia towards Soviet Russia. The relation to Russia and

[8] For more details see Milan Šuplata, *Geopolitical confusion in Central Europe. 2016*, available at http://www.cepolicy.org/publications/geopolitical-confusion-central-europe

views of the cooperation between Slovakia and Russia were also influenced by social experiences of Slovak inhabitants after World War II. In February 1948 communists took power in Czechoslovakia, and, with the direct support of the Soviet Union, established a totalitarian regime. In Slovakia, however, the communist regime existed in the conditions of catch-up modernisation. The flattening of socio-economic differences between the Czech and Slovak part of the common state, the process of Slovakia's industrialisation and urbanisation, technological progress in Slovak agriculture, development of socialist education and health systems, all these elements of modernisation created conditions for a less critical perception of the undemocratic nature of communist regime, imposed and supported by the Soviet Union.

The survey also includes the attitudes towards Ukraine, the neighbour of three V4 countries, which has recently undergone a turbulent development. The relation to Ukraine in the Visegrad Group is marked by a high degree of distrust; in neither country the trust prevails.

Unfortunately, we did not have a chance to explore in more detail the factors affecting the degree of trust/distrust; most probably they include concerns about political instability, inflow of migrants, threats relating to Russia-Ukraine conflict. Apart from a strong influence of the current Russia-Ukraine conflict, the prevailing distrust towards Ukraine can also reflect other, more lasting factors. In case of Poland, the causes of distrust can lie in the past, when relations between Poland and Ukraine suffered from sharp conflicts on the basis of ethnicity. The prevailing distrust of V4 citizens can also be influenced by a lower awareness of Ukraine, insufficient knowledge of those development trends in Ukrainian society that could increase the degree of trust towards this country. In addition, for a long period, anything even remotely related to Ukraine has been represented in public discourse of V4 countries (perhaps with the exception of Poland) only poorly, sometimes almost marginally. In fact, Ukraine entered the policy of V4 countries only in 1992, after the establishment of independent Ukrainian state. In the past, Ukraine as a part of the Soviet Union could only be present in Central European countries in the form of discursive thinking of a small number of people (in particular experts dealing with the country, its history, culture and language on a professional basis) with a minimal influence on the shaping of public opinions. The current distrust of V4 citizens towards Ukraine might also reflect the effect of the Russian propaganda machine after the outbreak of Russia-Ukraine conflict in the spring of 2014.

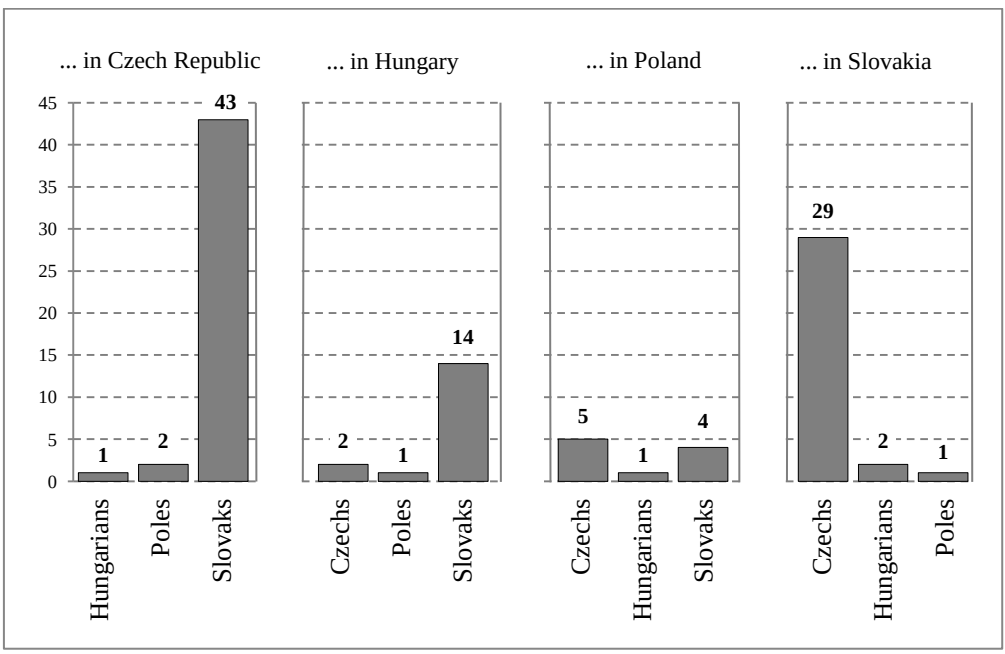
6. CONTACTS WITHIN THE V4

An important part of the survey was to study the intensity scale of mutual contacts (of touristic, commercial, consumer, and cultural character) among the inhabitants of individual countries of the Visegrad Group.

We have also been interested in how many V4 citizens have family members or friends in other V4 country. Here too the above-standard relations between Czechs and Slovaks are vital – 43% of Slovaks have a relative in the Czech Republic and one fifth of Czech have a relative in Slovakia (Graph 6). When asked about friends, the proportions were even higher – 62% of Slovak respondents have friends among the Czechs, and 59% of Czechs have friends among Slovaks (Graph 7). The dense network of relations, inherited from the period of common Czechoslovak state, and further expanded and deepened after 1993, creates conditions for further positive evaluations, for instance in case of the mutual trust.

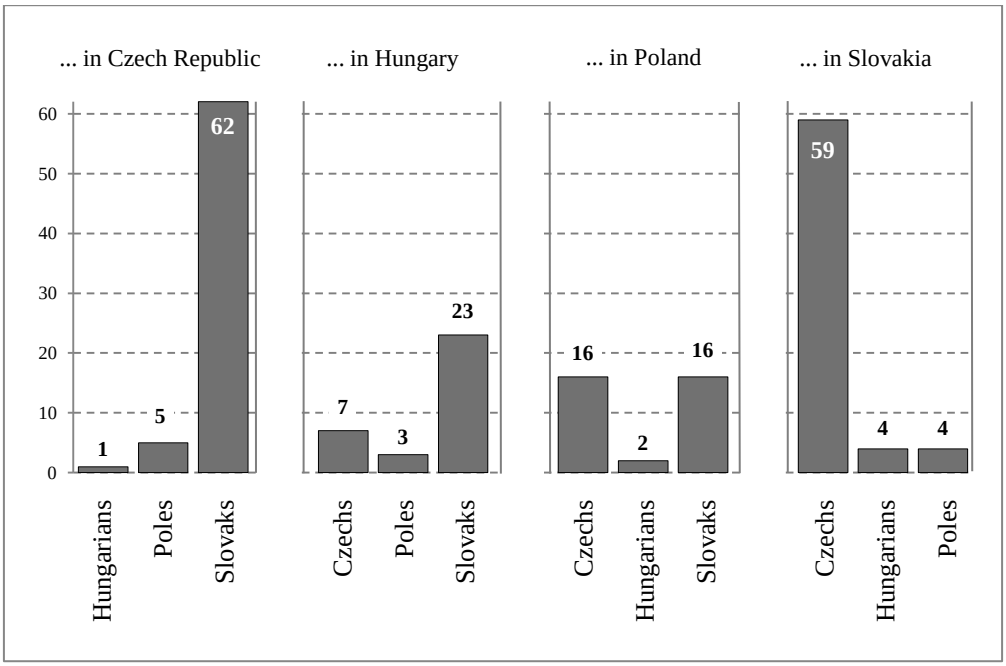
The second considerable tie exists between the inhabitants of Slovakia and of Hungary, mostly due to presence of a large population of ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia (when they were asked about a family member, the proportion of positive answers reached 64%, in case of friends 83%).

Graph 6: "Is there anybody in your family – in broader kinship – who lives in the Czech Republic/Hungary/Poland/Slovakia?" (in %)



Source: IVF 2015.

Graph 7: "Do you have friends or acquaintances among the Czechs/Hungarians/ Poles/Slovaks?" (in %)



Source: IVF 2015.

The findings of our representative survey focused on intensity of mutual visits of V4 citizens also show that the existence of a high frequency is only an illusion. The only exception is the contacts between Slovakia and the Czech Republic – 76% of Czech respondents said they visited Slovakia as tourists, and 75% of Slovaks have been to the Czech Republic. This symmetrical tie can be explained by the common past and the further development of mutual relations after 1993.

The second highest share is represented by citizens of Slovakia visiting Hungary (60%). As for Hungarian respondents, however, only 31% stated they visited Slovakia. This asymmetry stems from the fact that 71% of Slovakia's inhabitants visiting Hungary are ethnic Hungarians. The Poles are the least frequent travellers, though Poland as a tourist destination is quite frequently visited by both Slovaks (49%) and Czechs (43%) (Table 2).

Table 2: "Have you ever visited the Czech Republic/Hungary/Poland/Slovakia for touristic or recreational reasons?" (% of answers "yes")

	Czechs	Hungarians	Poles	Slovaks
Czech Republic	x	21	35	75
Hungary	46	x	18	60
Poland	43	18	x	49
Slovakia	76	31	27	x

Source: IVF 2015.

Those who had visited the particular country were also asked to evaluate its attractiveness as a tourist destination. The Poles, Hungarians and Slovaks agree that the most attractive tourist destination is the Czech Republic. In Poland, the second most attractive country is Slovakia; in Slovakia it is Hungary, while in Hungary it is Poland. In the eyes of the Czechs, the most attractive tourist destination is Slovakia, Hungary ranks second, while Poland ranks third. Expressing the attractiveness as a total of percentage for all assessments, the most attractive country within the V4 is the Czech Republic, followed by Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland (Table 3).

Table 3: "How would you assess the attractiveness of the Czech Republic/Hungary/ Poland/Slovakia as a tourist destination?" (% of answers "quite high attractiveness")

	Czechs	Hungarians	Poles	Slovaks
Czech Republic	x	61	57	68
Hungary	40	x	49	48
Poland	20	61	x	31
Slovakia	59	43	53	x

Source: IVF 2015.

Another indicator of contacts with a partner country is the purchase of consumer durable goods. In this respect, the strongest tie exists between Slovaks and Czechs: 56% of Slovak respondents said they purchased goods made in Czech Republic, and one third of Czech respondents stated that they purchased goods made in Slovakia. The second highest proportion of respondents comprised Czechs and Slovaks buying consumer durable goods from Poland, and they were followed by Slovak purchases of Hungarian durable goods. Other combinations are only marginal (Table 4).

Table 4: "Have you bought consumer durable goods like car, household equipment, electronics, etc. made in the Czech Republic/Hungary/Poland/Slovakia?" (% of answers "yes")

	Czechs	Hungarians	Poles	Slovaks
Czech Republic	x	11	11	56
Hungary	13	x	4	24
Poland	27	10	x	29
Slovakia	33	10	5	x

Source: IVF 2015.

The respondents in Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia saw Czech products as high-quality consumer durable goods. The Hungarian respondents also appreciated the quality of products made in Slovakia. According to Poles, Hungarian products too are of a high quality. The quality of Polish products is positively evaluated by Hungarians, whereas the attitude of Slovaks and Czechs is much more reserved (Table 5).

Table 5: "How would you assess the quality of these products made in the Czech Republic/Hungary/Poland/Slovakia?" (% of answers "high quality")

	Czechs	Hungarians	Poles	Slovaks
Czech Republic	x	51	48	63
Hungary	33	x	41	41
Poland	11	46	x	11
Slovakia	37	52	24	x

Source: IVF 2015.

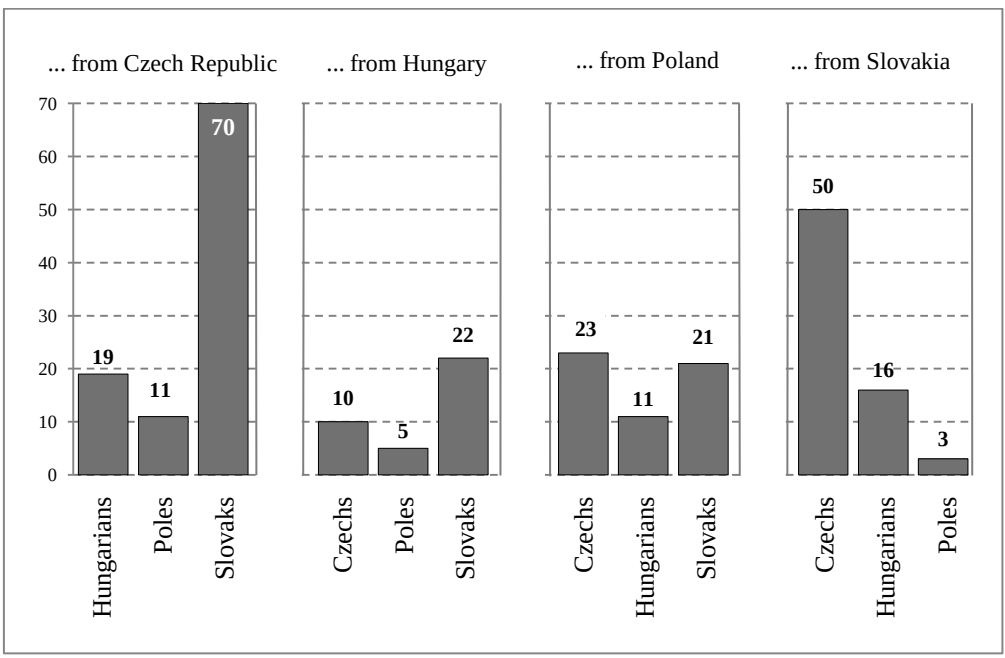
The survey also focused on the purchase of food products and beverages, which is the segment with a higher frequency. Though three quarters of Czechs and Slovaks buy Polish products, only about one tenth assess them as high quality products. Therefore it can be assumed that the price is a main motivating factor. In Slovakia, the negative assessment of Polish food products can reflect the critical reports on food imported from Poland published in media. Some experts pointed out that the criticism might well have been part of a deliberate negative campaign aroused by Slovak food producers who felt threatened by the competition of cheaper Polish food products. In their opinion, the campaign could also have been intended to discourage inhabitants of some regions in northern Slovakia from purchasing larger amount of affordable Polish food products

during their visits to Poland (a well-known phenomenon of Slovak seasonal shopping tourism in Poland).

On the other hand, only a small proportion of Hungarian respondents is buying Polish products, with more than a half appreciating their quality. As for the products made in Hungary, they are frequently purchased and the respondents appreciate their high quality. Hungarian food products have a particularly good reputation in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

The third area in which the survey assessed the frequency of mutual interactions was art and culture. In Slovak environment, the Czech culture predominates: 70% of respondents said they saw a movie, a theatre performance or read a book by Czech authors. Here too one can see the factor of Czech-Slovak togetherness, nourished by the closeness of languages and long-term cultural interactions of the two nations. On the other hand, about half of Czech respondents stated they came in touch with Slovak art and culture. The contact of Slovakia's inhabitants with the Hungarian culture is practiced mainly by ethnic Hungarians (71% of ethnic Hungarians living in Slovakia said they got in touch with Hungarian art) (Graph 8).

Graph 8: "In last years have you seen a movie, a theatre performance or have you read a book by author/s coming from the Czech Republic/Hungary/Poland/ Slovakia?" (in %)



Source: IVF 2015.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The V4 celebrates quarter-century of its existence. It became an example of regional cooperation that guarantees stability and good neighbourly relations. Despite the shifts in the commitment of politicians to Visegrad cooperation during those years, the citizens of the four countries perceive Visegrad as a relevant and meaningful regional group. For them Visegrad Group is not just a symbol, but a working body with a clear content.

Today, the Visegrad Four as a regional group is facing serious challenges. The political elites of particular countries must do their best to find appropriate solutions to the existing problems (EU financial situation, migration, terms and conditions of trade cooperation with the US within the proposed Transatlantic Trade Investment Partnership – TTIP) in a coaction with EU partners and EU institutions. With their commitment to cooperation and solidarity the leaders of four Central European countries would send a positive signal to the public on a continuing significance of the Visegrad cooperation as well as on a strong tie between historical destinies of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, and the destiny of the united Europe. This approach would certainly raise the awareness of inhabitants of V4 countries of their regional solidarity, and contribute to a more positive perception of cooperation within this remarkable regional format.

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25 Years of the V4 as Seen by the Public

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