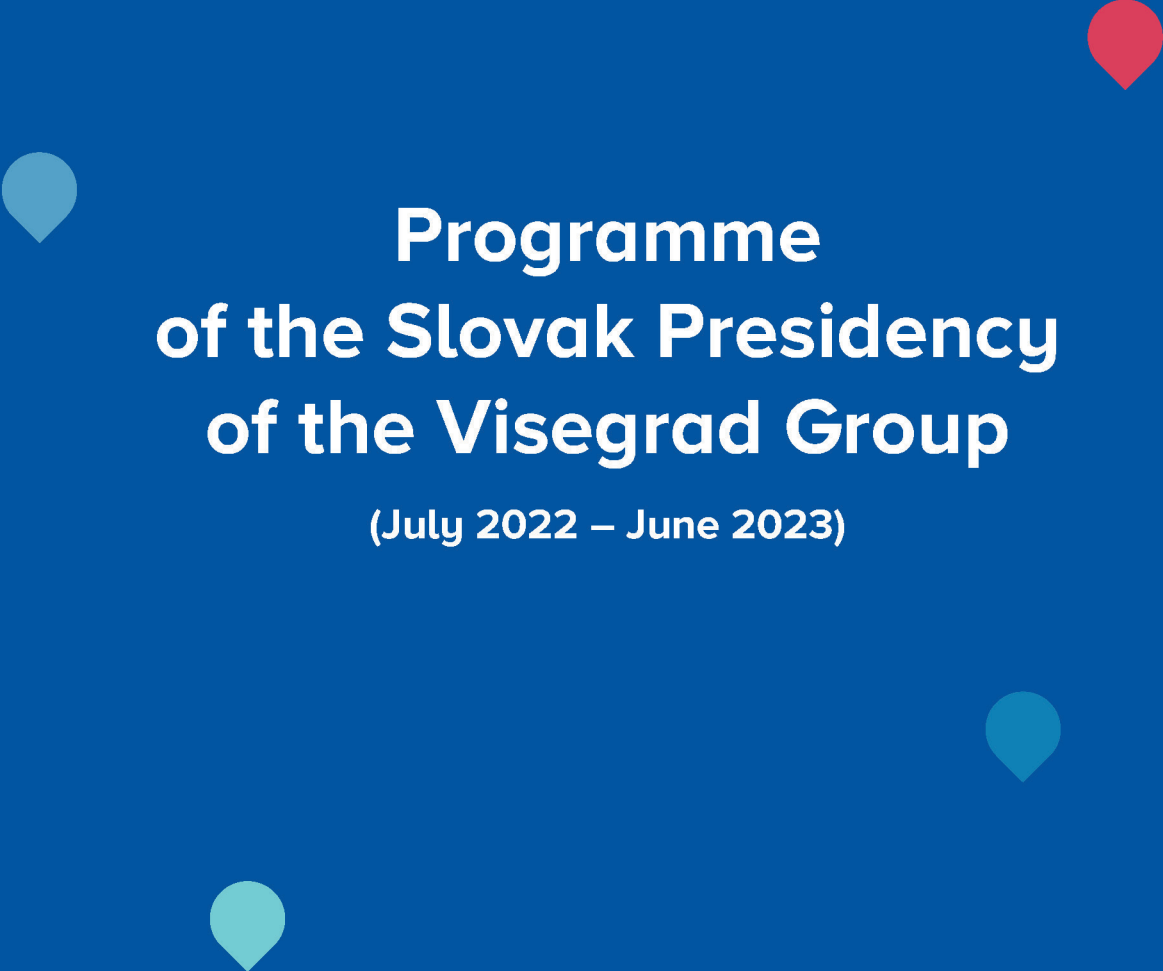




Programme of the Slovak Presidency of the Visegrad Group

(July 2022 – June 2023)



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I. Introduction

In July 2022, the Slovak Republic will take over its sixth Presidency of the Visegrad Group (V4).

The Slovak Presidency will operate in an unprecedented context of Russia's unjustified and unprovoked aggression against Ukraine, which represents a defining moment for our continent and, in particular, for our region.

Therefore, while building on previous achievements of our work, we need to return to the roots of Visegrad cooperation. More than ever, our cooperation must follow the principles of human rights, freedom, democracy, rule of law, good neighbourly relations and commitment to European integration and transatlantic cooperation, as stipulated in the Declaration of the Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic adopted on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Visegrad Group in Krakow. The Slovak Presidency will be ready to provide a platform for an open dialogue in this regard and will initiate an internal reflection on the role and priorities of Visegrad cooperation in the new geopolitical setup.

The current developments raises serious concerns related to the security and safety of our countries and citizens. Many of these need response at the global and European levels, but many can also be addressed at the regional level. In this context, the Slovak Presidency will build on activities and results of previous Presidencies and promote seeking practical solutions with added value for our citizens.

The V4 countries share a common interest in a strong and effective European Union and NATO. The unity and effectiveness of the EU and NATO policies are essential to address the scale and complexity of the challenges we face, including those ushered forth by the Russian aggression in Ukraine, in areas ranging from security and defence, through foreign policy to economy and energy. The Slovak Presidency will continue to identify areas of common interest and make sure that Visegrad cooperation contributes to common solutions and policies at both the EU and NATO levels.

We will follow up on successful cooperation with European and non-European partners within the V4+ format but will aim at streamlining this format and adapting it to the new geopolitical reality.

Following the decision of the European Council to grant the status of candidate country to Ukraine and to the Republic of Moldova, the V4 countries will continue supporting these countries on their path to the European Union. In order to grant the status of candidate country to Georgia, V4 countries will assist Georgia in fulfilling the priorities specified to this aim.

Western Balkans will be high on the agenda in order to achieve a tangible progress when it comes to enlargement process.

The Slovak Presidency will support the activities of the International Visegrad Fund (IVF). Increasing the budget to €10 million from 2022 onwards provides resources to strengthen regional cooperation, especially in the area of youth mobility. Increased attention will be paid to the programmes for countries of Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans. Particular attention will be paid to the mitigation of the consequences of the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Ukraine caused by the unprecedented and unprovoked Russian aggression, building also on the successful extraordinary V4 programme that financed projects supporting refugees from Ukraine in the total amount of €1 million through the Fund in Spring 2022.

Governments of the V4 countries will continue efforts to secure additional funding for the Visegrad Fund's projects from external donors. Projects focusing on scientific research in the field of healthcare and green transition with the involvement of external partners will be advanced.

The Slovak Presidency will also focus on cooperation with non-governmental organizations and support the implementation of numerous activities. The synergies achieved in this kind of cooperation will deliver greater visibility of the V4 activities among citizens.

II. Priorities of the Slovak V4 Presidency

The Slovak V4 Presidency will build on priority initiatives that fall within the strategic objectives set out during previous Presidencies, emphasizing tangible contributions to common European solutions and practical positive impacts on citizens.

The priorities of the Slovak V4 Presidency will focus on the following four areas:

1. **Interconnections**
2. **Economy**
3. **Sustainability**
4. **People**

1. INTERCONNECTIONS

Energy security remains a common priority, especially nowadays when European countries agreed to phase out the dependency on Russian gas, oil and coal imports as soon as possible, taking into account national circumstances. This includes the further development of nuclear energy and ensuring a level playing field for all low-carbon technologies.

The Slovak Presidency will focus on deepening regional cooperation in transport modernisation and development, including building cross-border interconnections and developing alternative routes and logistics capacities mainly for freight transport to and from Ukraine.

Given the current unstable and unpredictable situation caused by the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the Slovak Presidency will advocate developing links with partner countries in the field of defence and military cooperation, as well as contribute to strengthening the NATO's Eastern flank, while also paying attention to the threats and challenges emanating from the Southern flank of the Alliance.

1.1. Energy

The importance of energy security is underlined by the impact of the worsening geopolitical situation. The Slovak Presidency will work intensively on preparing and implementing regional and European measures aimed at phasing out the dependency on Russian energy raw material imports and at the further diversification of sources and transport routes. In addition to joint activities to secure natural gas supplies, the challenge is to achieve resource adequacy for low-carbon electricity supplies in the medium and long term.

A balanced energy mix is a prerequisite for ensuring a sustainable, secure, competitive and affordable supply for citizens and the industry. Together with the V4 partners, we will seek opportunities for developing regional energy infrastructures, including projects of common EU interest, and the effective deployment of clean technologies, including hydrogen, nuclear and renewable energy sources.

The persisting high energy prices will be another important topic. Regional cooperation is one way of solving this acute social and economic problem. The Slovak Presidency will provide a platform for coordinating preparations and the implementation of the REPower EU plan and for discussing possible measures at the EU level to address the causes and impacts of high energy prices.

The Slovak Presidency will share examples of good practice in the development and implementation of energy efficiency and renewable energy policies among the V4 countries.

The Slovak Presidency will continue to cooperate on ensuring further efficient use of the gas infrastructure and promote new LNG infrastructure development and interconnections between the V4 countries, also with the aim of phasing out our dependency on Russian oil and gas as soon as possible. Within the framework of the Gas Market Decarbonisation Package, the aim will be to promote an appropriate definition of natural gas as an important transition fuel and the creation of appropriate market conditions for all types of decarbonised gases.

The sustainable use and further development of nuclear energy is a prerequisite for achieving climate neutrality in the V4 region and the EU. During the Slovak Presidency, we will make efforts to ensure a level playing field for all low-carbon technologies in the EU relevant policies and funds dedicated to energy transition (e.g. RePower EU, Energy Taxation Directive, Sustainable Finance) – in line with the decision on the national energy mix and to reflect the benefits of nuclear energy in the EU policies and its significance as a vital branch of the economy, which has, for instance, a potential to create new jobs.

1.2. Transport

In the field of transport, the Slovak Presidency will focus primarily on completion of the TEN-T Core Network in the context of agreed V4 priorities in the ongoing negotiations on the revision of the TEN-T Regulation. Particular attention will be paid to the comprehensive coordination of the V4 countries' strategies for the development of TEN-T networks. Additional efforts will be given to the completion of the North-South interconnections.

In waterway transport, the focus will be on deepening cooperation on the modernisation and development of waterways, reducing emissions from waterborne transport in line with the objectives of the European Green Deal, exchange of experience in the implementation of infrastructure for alternative fuels within the TEN-T Core Network.

Rail transport and measures encouraging the use of rail have become one of the priorities of the European transport policy in the light of the objectives of the European Green Deal. The Presidency will support the implementation of the high-speed rail project in the V4 region and the development plan for interstate railway lines for the next 10 years. During the Slovak Presidency, a discussion will be held on solutions to the tender procedure rules for cross-border transport.

In combined transport, the Slovak Presidency will seek for common solutions in the development of continental combined transport, exchange of experience in obtaining subsidies for supporting combined and rail transport, support intermodal transport development in V4 countries by 2030, and looking beyond to 2040, also focusing on the use of the seaports.

As the geopolitical situation drastically changed due to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, we will endeavour to provide greater funding for the EU projects in the V4 region, for example in the field of military mobility. CEF funding for military mobility should be increased, without a reduction of the other CEF transport budget items.

We will also focus on good practices and exchange of views on the development of active mobility, as well as on the development of integrated transport systems, the introduction of a single ticketing system and the implementation of tender procedures for selecting carriers under the procurement of transport services for the public interest.

1.3. Cooperation on defence, hybrid threats and the police

The Slovak Presidency will maintain the defined direction and development of defence and military cooperation in accordance with the *Long Term Vision of the Visegrad Countries on Their Defence Cooperation* and the regularly updated *Action Plan of the Visegrad Group Defence Cooperation*. However, the main priorities in the field of defence will reflect and build on developments with regard to the unprovoked and unjustified Russian invasion in Ukraine. In this context, the Slovak Presidency will explore possibilities for common approaches towards:

- providing assistance in demining activities and removal of unexploded ordnance in Ukraine once the war has ended and the security situation allows to do so;
- preparing the V4 EU Battlegroup for a 6-month standby period in the first half of 2023 and affiliating units to the Joint Logistics Support Group Headquarters and discussing the future of V4 EU BG also in the light of the EU RDC;
- scaling up joint training and exercises to enhance the readiness and interoperability of the armed forces, as well as providing a platform to continue sharing experience in the field of building territorial defence forces;
- developing transport infrastructure in relation to military mobility, following the provisions of the EU Strategic Compass;
- developing capabilities and finding constructive solutions in the field of joint research, developing and procuring military-technical capabilities, strengthening cooperation between defence industry enterprises of the V4 countries, including by looking for opportunities to use EU and NATO initiatives that support research, development and joint procurement of measures proposed by the European Commission to address the Defence Investment Gaps;
- coordinating national positions on the EU and NATO developments and activities, development of the EU-NATO strategic partnership in a way, which preserves the complementarity of their efforts;
- expanding V4 cooperation with Ukraine; promoting V4+ cooperation and dialogue with partners (USA, France, Germany, UK, the Republic of Korea);
- further exploring the possibilities for conducting cross-border operations in order to ensure mutual protection of the airspace of the V4 countries to improve the efficiency of the use of declared forces within NATINAMDS.

Given the increase in the intensity of hybrid threats, which threaten the foundations of the democratic rule of law and represent one of the most serious risks to state security, the Slovak Presidency is initiating cooperation on addressing and preventing hybrid threats. While countering hybrid threats is a Member State competence, the V4 countries will enhance their cooperation with the aim of mitigating the impacts of threats such as dissemination of propaganda and disinformation on our societies. Cyber attacks also represent a growing threat that need to be addressed in the V4/V4+ framework.

The Slovak Presidency will continue the existing high-quality police cooperation between the V4 countries, especially in the form of expert meetings and joint exercises, including the development of cooperation in the field of crisis management.

2. ECONOMY

One of the main challenges for the European economy in this decade is the green and digital transition. It rests on two equally important pillars: investments and reforms. While in the past year our economies have faced challenges – such as shortages of key raw materials or disrupted supply chains and rising energy prices – current development associated with the unprovoked and unjustified Russian aggression against Ukraine presents direct security and stability threats. This underlines the urgent need to strengthen the resilience of the European economy, including the energy sector and cyber resilience of the market.

The new economic growth model must reflect these challenges and steer Europe towards sustainable, resilient and inclusive growth. The Slovak Presidency will place particular emphasis on socially equitable growth.

Not only Russian aggression against Ukraine but also the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the need to fight against disinformation, which is a real threat to the functioning of democracies. The relevance of this topic also requires the attention and coordinated approach within the V4 region. One of the main challenges the V4 countries are facing in this regard is the improvement of digital skills of their population, which is a key prerequisite for the development of the economy, as well as for the resilience of society. Under the Slovak Presidency, attention will be paid to the need to focus on testing and implementing new technologies (especially the artificial intelligence), which can be tools for competitiveness and economic growth for our countries.

We consider the Single Market, which celebrates its 30th anniversary on 1st January 2023, to be one of the most valued achievements of the European integration. We will aim at its further deepening and the removal of existing barriers as well as its digital transformation. Together we will search for ways to maximise its potential especially taking into account the needs of small and medium-sized enterprises. The Slovak Presidency will encourage cooperation on the V4 contribution to the discussion on a long-term action plan for the Single Market, with a particular focus on the services sector. The aim of the Slovak Presidency is to build on the V4's long-lasting cooperation within the Single Market, innovations and the business environment.

2.1. Finance

The financial markets are currently undergoing many changes, especially in the V4 countries, faced with multiple challenges such as digitalisation, penetration of new technologies in the financial market or climate change. These are already shaping and will continue to shape the public and expert debates on the financial markets. The Slovak Presidency will focus on:

- financial innovation, with the emphasis being on the development of the use of crypto-assets and on the forthcoming European regulation, preparations for the review of the framework for payment services, as well as progress on the work on the digital euro and its future use;
- sustainable financing to meet the objectives of the Capital Markets Union, which is essential to overcome the crisis and support the dual transformation of economies across the EU;
- preventing the legalisation of criminal proceeds and terrorist financing.

The Communication from the European Commission on the EU economic governance launched a public consultation on the review of the economic surveillance framework and the coordi-

nation of fiscal policies. The review will provide an opportunity for the EU Member States to reflect on the key objectives of the governance framework and assess its functioning. Drawing on the public consultation and ongoing discussions in various fora, the Commission plans to issue proposed adjustments to the EU economic framework later this year. These will be the subject of consultations during the Slovak Presidency.

One of the main topics relating to the 2021 – 2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) is the new Own Resources Package that will differentiate the revenue sources for the EU budget. The aim of the introduction of new own resources would be to help improve the resilience mechanism for the flow of funds to the EU budget. The new resources should also help address the current challenges that the EU is facing. Creating a globalised international environment requires us to act together to achieve climate neutrality, reduce biodiversity loss, digital transition, and strengthen social Europe while ensuring that no Member State would bear excessive burden. The own resources system shall be maintained simple, transparent, stable, fair and predictable. Under the Slovak Presidency, cooperation will be aimed at identifying overlapping positions for facilitating negotiations at the EU level.

2.2. Innovation and small and medium-sized enterprises

Innovations are the driving force of a knowledge-based economy and the basis of modern economies in developed countries. Small and medium-sized enterprises are the backbone of the economy and the engines of innovation, employment and social and regional integration. Slovak Presidency will focus primarily on exchange of experiences of innovation, implementation of appropriate parts of the Recovery and Resilience Plans in the V4 countries and the fostering innovations in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The emphasis will also be put on green innovations, especially on exchanging information and promoting cooperation between V4 countries.

In this context, cities and regions have long been key enablers of innovation in V4 countries and beyond. Municipal and regional governments have the potential to support, nurture and drive innovation with direct impact on the quality of life of their citizens and attractiveness of our region in general. Therefore, enhanced knowledge-transfer, exchange of experiences and expertise and cooperation in the field of smart cities and regions will result in further developing regional R & D & I ecosystems, leveraging their synergies, and ultimately bring innovation closer to the citizens to increase the positive impact of green, social and digital transformation on a local, regional and V4 level.

The Slovak Presidency will continue cooperation with third partners such as Japan, the Republic of Korea and Israel and will seek the possibility of establishing a parallel cooperation with other interested countries (e.g. Singapore, India). The main focus will be on ongoing joint RDI initiatives and the mutual exchange of information to enhance industry, research and innovations so as to best exploit the potential of the V4 region and facilitate cross-border partnerships between research, academic institutions and business entities, along with institutional cooperation.

Here, the Slovak Presidency will focus on sharing examples of good practice with regards to better regulation, specifically ex-post regulatory impact assessment, adherence to the “one in-one out” principle, effective avoidance of gold-plating and the pursuit of innovative approaches to reducing bureaucratic burdens. The aim of the Slovak Presidency will be to push for a joint effort to improve the international rankings of V4 countries in business environment surveys.

2.3. Tourism

Under the Slovak Presidency, the V4 countries will continue to strengthen cooperation in tourism by exchange of information and focus mainly on the following issues:

- joint action in connection with the particularly negative impact of the aggression of the Russian Federation in the war in Ukraine on tourism in the V4 region;
- close cooperation between national tourism agencies under the common “Discover Central Europe” brand;
- increasing cross-border tourism between neighbouring regions, development of cross-border tourism products, sharing good practices with existing Euroregions in Central Europe;
- renewing and adapting regional tourism as part of the relaunch following the COVID-19 pandemic and focusing on sustainability.

2.4. Agriculture

In agriculture, the Slovak Presidency will build on the well-established regional cooperation and coordinated approach to enforce common positions. Cooperation will reflect the challenges facing the European agricultural and food sector, including those caused by the Russian aggression against Ukraine and its consequences for food security in Europe. The Slovak Presidency will work towards ensuring a modern and sustainable European agricultural sector with the emphasis on food security and sovereignty.

The main priorities will include preparation for the implementation of the Common Agricultural Policy after 2022. The emphasis will partly be on the cooperation and exchanging experience of the new delivery model (NDM) and on introduction of financial instruments in the agricultural sector.

Another priority will be the EU Soil Strategy for 2030, also in relation to the carbon farming and digitisation of agriculture. Joint coordination over the forthcoming EU legislative framework on soil conservation and sustainable land use will be important. Attention will also be paid to achieving the objectives of the “Farm to Fork” Strategy and coordinating works within the BIOEAST Initiative.

Efficient coordination between V4 countries will also be needed when it comes to the revision of the Sustainable Use of Pesticides Directive, which is linked to various EU strategies. It might be necessary to form and enforce common positions of the V4 during the negotiations.

Possible coordination is also foreseen as regards other initiatives, mainly derived from the EU legislative process, to be presented under the Slovak Presidency.

2.5. Cohesion

Having in mind the importance of economic, social and territorial cohesion of the European Union, the Slovak Presidency will discuss and coordinate the V4 common approach in cohesion policy and its ability to respond to unexpected crises as well as to maintain balance between adaptability and pursuit of long-term objectives of the policy.

The Slovak Presidency shall be conducted in the framework of the two programming periods, closing 2014–2020 and starting 2021–2027. This brings momentum for the V4 countries to evaluate and exchange experience as well as to share best practice from the implementation.

3. SUSTAINABILITY

The V4 countries share and jointly promote fairness, solidarity, social justice, technological neutrality and cost effectiveness in policies and instruments to achieve the EU's common energy and climate goals.

One of the objectives of the Slovak Presidency will be to strengthen sustainable development in the Central European region.

3.1. Climate neutrality, climate and biodiversity protection

The Slovak Presidency will continue the discussion on proposals in the final stage of negotiations on the Fit for 55 Package in order to reflect as much as possible the principles of just, socially just transition and technological neutrality in the EU climate policy.

On climate change and air protection, we will focus on the following points:

- climate mainstreaming and synchronising laws and regulations to ensure a combined positive effect on the climate;
- interlinkages and synergies of biodiversity loss and climate change adaptation measures;
- identifying suitable EU instruments that contribute to the global reduction of emissions;
- emphasizing the need for just transition and proposing relevant means to tackle energy poverty;
- national climate law (act) and discussion on the preparatory procedures and related issues associated with implementation of national climate laws (acts).

Another important issue to be discussed under the Slovak Presidency is nature and biodiversity protection. In connection with the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030 particular attention will be paid to the target to increase the surface of strictly protected areas and to the expected legislative proposal on the restoration of ecosystems.

Additionally, in the 2nd half of 2022 the new Global Biodiversity Framework is expected to be adopted at the CBD COP15 and V4 countries will discuss ways to implement new global biodiversity goals and targets.

Another important issue is adaptation to climate change in connection with the Forging a climate-resilient Europe – the new EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change. As climate change is unavoidable and already has a strong (both direct and indirect) impact on life of the Europeans, the idea of building the resilient society and economy should be promoted among V4 countries.

On forests and forestry, the Slovak Presidency's priority will be to promote sustainable forest management, including close to nature practices, particularly as part of the implementation of the new EU Forest Strategy for 2030. Sustainable forest management as an internationally established concept can make a significant contribution to the objectives of climate stability, carbon neutrality and sustainable development. The main objective is to continue effective cooperation and sharing information and experience among V4 countries especially in light of current EU legislative proposals that relate to forests in order to promote common interests at the EU level and possibly in other international organisations and processes.

The Slovak Presidency will build on previous work on water issues, particularly on addressing drought and water scarcity, focusing on the following points:

- nature-based and nature-friendly solutions in drought management;
- decision-making schemes to regulate water offtake and use, limiting water use in situations of water scarcity and drought;
- use of the water exploitation index (water exploitation index plus WEI+);
- addressing drought and water scarcity in river basin management plans,
- protection of water resources due to water scarcity – ensuring sufficient water quantity and quality for the purpose of water supply for the population,
- finding the complex solutions concerning soil-water interactions, with reference to the development of the concept of soil as a “carbon and water bank of the country”.

3.2. Circular economy

The circular economy is one of the pillars of the European Green Deal and means of meeting the greenhouse gas emissions targets of 55% reduction by 2030 and making the EU climate-neutral by 2050.

The main priorities are to extend product life cycle, reduce the manufacturing and processing carbon footprint, reduce material complexity and introduce the “product as a service” principle to reduce consumption, waste production and to encourage waste prevention.

The Slovak Presidency will focus on exchanging experience of research, the search for and promotion of innovative solutions and technological developments in industrial production and in recycling and waste management. Attention will also be paid to waste separation, biodegradable waste management, the operation of biogas and composting plants, the deposit system and construction waste management.

3.3. Fair and sustainable financing of the green transition

The commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 and thereby putting the EU as a whole on track to achieve climate neutrality by 2050 has economic and social impacts. Here, the Slovak Presidency will focus on the negotiations over the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) Proposal, the revision of the Energy Taxation Directive and the possibility of establishing a Social Climate Fund and the proposed extension of the EU ETS to buildings and road transport sectors. The special attention will be given to the Just Transition Fund which is the crucial tool to mitigate the socio-economic consequences of the most vulnerable regions in transition.

3.4. Geology and natural resources

Under the Slovak Presidency, one aim is to consider geological problems and natural erosion such as environmental hazards, landslides and other types of slope deformations. These are the result of exogenous geodynamic processes that are found across Central Europe. Especially in light of the revision of the EU Critical Raw Materials List scheduled for 2023, we will discuss how to attract investment in environmentally sustainable, low-carbon or carbon-neutral extraction of key minerals for a dual transforma-

tion, green and digital, taking into account the challenges of the EU autonomy, including the ways of regaining resources used in the old and new technologies. Exchanges about best practices with the Nordic countries will be envisaged. The Slovak Presidency will also support closer cooperation with the aim to conserve and enhance the value of areas of geological significance in Earth history, including diverse landscapes and geological formations, as well as to promote sustainable development e.g. through geotourism and geoscience education. It can happen through cooperation among the V4 regions' geoparks which promote the links between geological heritage and all other natural and cultural heritage, clearly demonstrating that geodiversity is the foundation of all ecosystems and the basis of human interaction with the landscape.

3.5. Health

Over the last few years, the health care systems in the V4 region have been in a permanent state of crisis because of the pandemic and, recently, due to the influx of refugees escaping Ukraine due to the war conflict. The coming period will be extremely important in terms of building closer regional coordination and improving V4 interconnections regarding information and material resources.

There is a pressing need to coordinate joint activities and positions of the V4 countries both at global and regional levels of the European Union and the World Health Organization given the current situation and negotiations on the future pandemic instrument and the revised International Health Regulations.

The Slovak Presidency will explore possibilities of continuation of Fair and Affordable Pricing of medicines initiative (FaAP).

In the post-pandemic period, it will be important to focus on sharing mutually applicable lessons learnt in local pandemic management and the application of innovative approaches to prevention, early diagnosis and therapy, as well as in biomedical and clinical research in noncommunicable diseases.

The Slovak Presidency will also raise the issue of interoperability of health data in order to improve its functionality and connectivity. An important aspect of the Slovak Presidency will also be the elimination of inequalities in health care related to human resources in health governance.

3.6. Migration

The Slovak Presidency will reflect on the negotiations in the Council of the EU on reforming the Common European Asylum System, in particular the progress made under the French Presidency in putting the so-called gradual approach to the reform into practice. With the aim to add constructive input to the debate, alongside with long-term V4 priorities such as external border protection and prevention of irregular migration, including returns, the V4 countries will continue to present solidarity as of key importance, which has to be an integral part of our efforts to set up a new EU migration and asylum policy.

The refugee influx caused by Russia's aggression against Ukraine, in which Visegrad countries are a frontline region, put additional pressure on our countries and reminded us once again of the need for close regional cooperation.

The Slovak Presidency will seek the common positions within the V4 countries on the reform of the Schengen area, with particular emphasis on a properly functioning and safe Schengen.

The Slovak Presidency will be in close contact with the Czech and Swedish Presidencies of the Council of the EU on this matter.

3.7. Research and space

The Slovak Presidency intends to support Action 11 of the Policy Agenda of the new European Research Area (ERA) by sharing experience in research and development in new low-carbon energy sources and alternative fuels, including the use of hydrogen throughout its production and consumption cycle and exploring the importance of nuclear energy as a clean source of affordable energy for the EU and its citizens.

Raising participation in cutting edge European research and initiatives, including the involvement of V4 research teams in Horizon Europe Framework Programme projects, remains a priority. It will be necessary to assess the first experience of involvement in new European research and innovation partnerships and missions, as well as the effectiveness of specific measures to enhance programme participation and the implementation of synergies with other EU programmes. Based on this experience, it will be appropriate to coordinate a joint approach to preparations for the new Horizon Europe work programme for the coming period, as well as inclusion of associated countries of the Eastern Europe and Western Balkans in EU research activities.

In the framework of the regional scientific and technical cooperation, mainly the area of space activities is gaining importance. Space is a dynamically growing and cross-cutting sector with opportunities for economic transformation in high value-added industries. The Slovak Presidency will seek to increase cooperation in the space sector through establishment of partnerships between institutions and companies within the V4 region, based on the V4 Prime Ministerial Memorandum of Understanding on Enhancing Cooperation in the Field of Space Research and Peaceful Use of Outer Space.

4. PEOPLE

The Slovak Presidency intends to use the recent increase in the International Visegrad Fund's annual budget to strengthen cooperation, particularly in youth mobility and people-to-people contacts. Special emphasis will be placed on promoting the V4 as a cultural space in Europe.

4.1. Culture

The Slovak Presidency will build on the cross-border approach cooperation on cultural heritage management in the V4 countries. The focal point of this cooperation enhancement will be the organization of the following events:

- "V4 Heritage Academy – Management of World Heritage Sites" at the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Levoča, Spišský Hrad and Associated Cultural Sites". The 11th edition of the training programme under the auspices of the V4 Cultural Heritage Experts' Working Group is coordinated by the International Cultural Centre in Kraków, who organizes this event since 2006.
- Meetings of cultural heritage experts under the auspices of the V4 Ministries of Culture focused on cooperation and networking of V4 castles and chateaux, with the aim of joint promotion and presentation, tourism development and professional relations strengthening within the cultural heritage of the V4 countries.

The Slovak Presidency will continue in cooperation on the audiovisual industry. Given the growing interest shown in the V4 countries by international film production companies, the Presidency's efforts will focus on joint support for professional

developments within the audiovisual industry, with the aim of strategically strengthening the V4 countries' position in the international film industry.

4.2. Education, youth and sport

Regarding the internationalisation of higher education, the Slovak Presidency will focus on boosting various areas of cooperation between V4 universities. These include joint degree programmes, the European University Initiative, scholarship and programme schemes, scientific and research cooperation and document recognition.

The Presidency will seek to create opportunities for sharing good practices and recognising non-formal education and for introducing new learning models in higher education and linking lifelong learning and higher education. Another key topic will be the introduction of micro-credentials and recognising the outcomes of the associated training programmes for those wishing to continuing studies.

Under the Slovak Presidency, V4 cooperation will continue concerning the automatic recognition of qualifications giving access to higher education and higher education qualifications obtained the V4 countries for further studies, based on the related Ministerial Declaration (signed in October 2021, in Győr). Also, the cooperation between the V4 countries' higher education quality assurance (QA) agencies will continue in line with the MoU on establishing the Visegrad Four Quality Assurance Forum (V4QA Forum).

The Slovak Presidency will explore the possibility of implementing projects in the field of youth work. There is also potential for cooperation on ways of providing special assistance to citizens requiring childcare for the under fours as part of effective investments for the future.

We will also take the opportunity to establish cooperation and share knowledge and good practices on encouraging children's and young people's participation in school and after-school sports and physical exercise, regardless of physical ability, to raise physical activity levels and promote healthy lifestyles.

In sport we will continue with joint project to strengthen V4 regional cooperation by organising "Olympic Hopes" junior sports competitions and provide special opportunities for junior competitions in around 40 sports disciplines to be held in the V4 countries.

4.3. Life quality and social area

The Slovak Presidency will focus on the social area and life quality, also in the context of long-term challenges such as demographic change, counteracting the marginalization of rural, mountain and submontane areas, poverty, including energy poverty and the impact on social systems and employment policies.

As part of the exchange of experience, family assistance and family and working life, the Slovak Presidency will create opportunities to share examples of good practices in the context of the arrival of refugees from Ukraine, their integration into the labour market and the protection of vulnerable groups.

V4 cooperation and coordinated action on developing selected positions within the framework of the EPSCO Council meetings have proven to be effective on many occasions in the past. An important topic will be energy poverty and specifically the main drivers of energy poverty and the concept of their elimination.



