



**XXI. MEZINÁRODNÍ KOLOKVIUM O REGIONÁLNÍCH VĚDÁCH. SBORNÍK PŘÍSPĚVKŮ.**

**21<sup>ST</sup> INTERNATIONAL COLLOQUIUM ON REGIONAL SCIENCES. CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS.**

Place: Kurdějov (Czech Republic)  
June 13-15, 2018

Publisher: Masarykova univerzita, Brno

**Edited by:**

Viktorie KLÍMOVÁ

Vladimír ŽÍTEK

*(Masarykova univerzita / Masaryk University, Czech Republic)*

**Vzor citace / Citation example:**

AUTOR, A. Název článku. In Klímová, V., Žítek, V. (eds.) *XXI. mezinárodní kolokvium o regionálních vědách. Sborník příspěvků*. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2018. s. 1–5. ISBN 978-80-210-8969-3.

AUTHOR, A. Title of paper. In Klímová, V., Žítek, V. (eds.) *21<sup>st</sup> International Colloquium on Regional Sciences. Conference Proceedings*. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2018. pp. 1–5. ISBN 978-80-210-8969-3.

*Publikace neprošla jazykovou úpravou. / Publication is not a subject of language check.*

*Za správnost obsahu a originalitu výzkumu zodpovídají autoři. / Authors are fully responsible for the content and originality of the articles.*

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ISBN 978-80-210-8969-3

ISBN 978-80-210-8970-9 (online : pdf)

# 'DISCOVER CENTRAL EUROPE' – PROMOTION OF THE VISEGRAD GROUP'S CROSS-BORDER TOURIST PRODUCTS

**TOMASZ STUDZIENIECKI<sup>1</sup>**

**BEATA MEYER<sup>2</sup>**

**MARZENA WANAGOS<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Economics of Services  
Faculty of Entrepreneurship and Commodity Science  
Gdynia Maritime University

✉ Ul. Morska 81-87, 81-225 Gdynia, Poland,  
E-mail: t.studzieniecki@wpit.am.gdynia.pl, m.wanagos@wpit.am.gdynia.pl

<sup>2</sup>Department of Tourism Management  
Faculty of Management and Economics of Services  
University of Szczecin

✉ Ul. Cukrowa 8, 71-004 Szczecin, Poland  
E-mail: meyer.beata@gmail.com

## **Annotation**

*This paper raises the issue of branding cross-border destinations. It analyses the Visegrad Group (V4) promoted in the tourist market under the "Central Europe" brand. The authors seek an answer to the question whether the V4 is a part of the Central Europe brand and if so, whether all its countries are beneficiaries of such branding to the same degree. In order to answer the question, the authors delimit and visualise Central Europe in the academic and tourist approach. In the former case, they use 10 randomly selected references, in the latter case – 10 randomly selected tourist products offered by tour operators. Furthermore, they conduct a comparative analysis of these products and products provided by the V4 Group. The research has shown that the V4 Group is a part of the Central Europe brand to a significant degree. Tourist products provided by tour operators are very similar, but they differ from those offered by the V4 Group. The V4 Group puts focus on domestic products, tour operators – on transnational ones. A model product provided by tour operators is a one-week coach trip across Central European cities, with particular consideration of capital cities and sites on the UNESCO list. The "Central Europe" brand seems to be the most rational and, therefore, the most effective tool for the tourist promotion of the Visegrad Group.*

## **Key words**

*tourism, product, branding, Visegrad, Europe*

**JEL classification:** Z32, Z33, H77

## **1. Introduction**

The Visegrad Group (V4) was established in 1991. It is an informal platform for cooperation that is comprised of four Central European countries: Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. These countries have not only the neighbouring and similar geopolitical conditions in common, but above all joint history, tradition, culture and values. The purpose of the Group was to intensify cooperation in the development of democratic national structures and a free-market economy and to join the process of European integration. In 2002 the cooperation was extended by tourism. The stimulation of inbound tourism became a priority. For this purpose, tourist products were developed, important markets were identified and promotional activities were launched.

It was necessary to introduce a cross-border brand into the tourist market. Thus, the Visegrad Group decided to promote itself in foreign markets under the Central Europe brand.

## 2. Branding of cross-border areas

The processes of integration and international cooperation create favourable conditions for the development of transnational areas (Perkmann, 2003). Some of these areas become tourist destinations (Weidenfeld, 2013, Studzieniecki, Palmowski, Korneevets, 2016). In its origin, the term „tourism destination“ is a typical geographical term and is understood as a part of geographical space (Zemla, 2016). Tourist brands support the promotion of destinations. Cross-border tourist products have become the key elements of the tourist brand (Gardzińska, Meyer, Sawińska, 2015, Krogmann, Šolcová, Nemčíková, et al., 2015). Products should be developed in accordance with the principles of ethics (Kizielewicz, 2015) and corporate social responsibility (Spodarczyk, Szlagowska-Rudzka, 2015). They should reflect social development of destinations (Gumeniuk, 2017). Naming is the key tool in branding (Rosa, 2012, Meyer, 2013). The necessity for a properly chosen brand name that must reflect the core and nature of the product is standard (Zemla, 2009, Nemcikova, Krogmann, Dubcova, 2016, Antosova, Gomez, 2014, Smalec, 2014). Brand is a key factor of consumers' decisions (Trembosova, Dubcova, 2016) Sometimes a cross-border area has already had its name and brand. However, in a situation when it is not able to ensure tourist success, it is justified to create a separate tourist brand (Zenker, Jacobsen, 2015).

## 3. Tourist promotion of the Visegrad Group

The Visegrad Group is a group of regional cooperation. It is comprised of Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. It was established in 1991 (Fitzmaurice, 1998). In 2002 tourism became a part of this cooperation. Tourist cooperation is continuous and is coordinated by ministers responsible for tourism and by heads of national tourist organisations. As part of this cooperation, tourist products are prepared, target markets are identified, and promotional activities are launched (Studzieniecki, 2016). Tourist promotion is focused mainly on priority external markets (including American, Brazilian, Russian, Chinese and Japanese markets). Promotional activities in the intraregional market are very limited and occasional (Zemla, Ziolkowska – Weiss, 2017).

A tourist brand had to be created in order to promote the Visegrad Group as a destination. The term "the Visegrad Region" or "the Visegrad Group" in no way guaranteed recognition of this area. On the other hand, many people sometimes associated the symbol of the V4 with the automotive industry (V4 is a symbol of the V-engine and a Ducati motorcycle model) rather than with tourism. The slogan "European Quartet - one melody" was a turning point. However, the term "European Quartet" was sometimes used to describe other European countries than the V4 (Education First, 2018).

The launching of the 'Discover Central Europe' website was a breakthrough in the promotion of the V4 Group as websites are very important in branding and promoting destinations (Hanna, Rowley, 2015). A brave decision to create the "Central Europe" brand was made. The brand was to be associated with the Visegrad Region. Since tourism in the Visegrad Region is seasonal (Skrzeszewska, Grobelna, 2017), the creation of a full-year offer was challenging. The website 'Discover Central Europe' is similar to the website "Visit Europe" administered by the European Travel Commission. But the former promotes 4 countries, the latter the whole of Europe. Despite their unquestioned similarities, these websites are not competing. The 'Discover Central Europe' website is cosier, clearer, the graphics looks better. It contains not only information, images, videos, but most of all potential tourist products of the V4 Group. The "Visit Europe" website (2018) interprets the term Central Europe differently. In addition to the Visegrad Group, this region includes Austria. This raises the following question: What is Central Europe and how to define it in the tourist approach?

Fig 1: Discover Central Europe Website



Source: <https://twitter.com/visiteurope>

Fig. 2: Visit Europe Website



source: <https://www.visiteurope.com/>

#### 4. Concept of Central Europe

The term "Central Europe" appears in academic literature very frequently, but it is interpreted very differently as there is no single, official definition. This interpretation depends on the context of delimitation. Such delimitation is usually based on the borders of countries; as a result, the border of the region may change when the borders of the countries change. Central Europe is a region that is comprised of 4 to 10 countries. Statistically, it is comprised of 6.4 countries. More countries appear in the historical and geographical context, fewer in the economic context and in the context concerning political science. In total, 16 countries aspire to have the status of a Central European country. The core of Central Europe is made of the V4 countries (tab. 1).

**Tab. 1: Interpretation of Central Europe in the interdisciplinary approach**

Author	Delimitation context	PL	CZ	SK	HU	RO	DE	AT	IT	HR	SI	BA	MK	BG	GR	DK	CH	Total
Johnson (2001)	Historical context	+	+	+	+		+	+		+	+							8
Ellenberg (1988)	Natural context	+	+	+	+		+	+								+	+	8
Magocsi (2002)	Historical context	+	+	+	+	+				+	+	+		+	+			10
Agh (1998)	Context concerning political science	+	+	+	+			+		+	+							7
Engenendt (2011)	Economic context	+	+		+		+											4
Roy, Rivera (2001)	Context concerning political science	+	+		+						+							4
Luzon (2014)	Geographical context	+	+	+	+		+	+	+		+							8
Bankowicz (2014)	Context concerning political science	+	+	+	+	+								+				6
Sabic, Drulak (2012)	Geographical context	+	+	+	+						+							5
Beblavý (2007)	Economic context	+	+	+	+													4
Number of indications		10	10	8	10	2	4	4	1	3	6	1	1	2	1	1	1	64

Source: authors' own processing, symbols in accordance with ISO 3166

In the tourist approach, Central Europe can be defined based on tourist products offered by tour operators. In this context, Central Europe is a region that is comprised of 3 to 6 countries. Statistically, it is comprised of 4.9 countries. Theoretically, 7 countries aspire to have the status of a Central European country. In practice, there are 6 countries as the Netherlands appears incidentally (tab. 2).

**Tab. 2: Interpretation of Central Europe in the tourist approach**

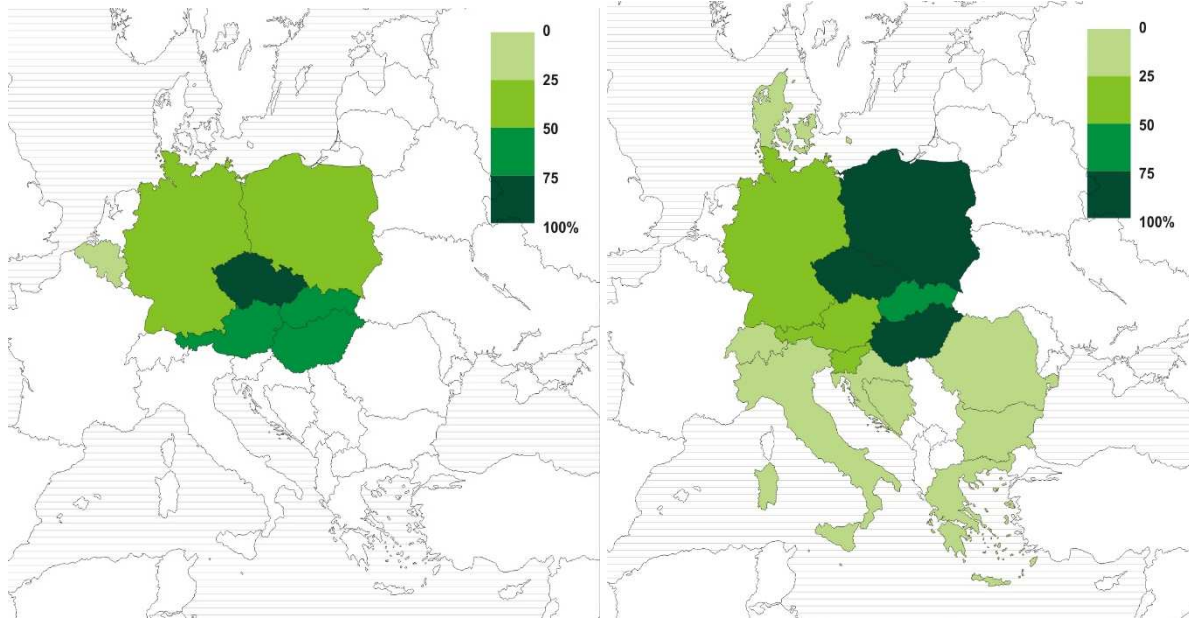
Tour operator	Registered office	PL	CZ	SK	HU	DE	AT	NL	Total
Cosmos	United States	+	+	+	+	+	+		6
Intrepid	Australia	+	+	+	+		+		5
Abercrombie & Kent	United States		+		+		+		3
Gate1Travel	United States	+	+	+	+	+	+		6
Akropol	Russia	+	+			+	+		4
Cedok	Czech Republic	+	+	+	+	+	+		6
Ziggy's Tours	United States		+	+	+		+		4
Tour a Europa	Mexico		+	+	+	+	+		5
Tours4fun	United States		+	+	+	+	+	+	6
Artur Travel	Poland	+	+	+	+				4
Total		6	10	9	9	5	9	1	49

Source: authors' own processing, symbols in accordance with ISO 3166

In the tourist approach Central Europe (fig. 3) does not cover the area of Central Europe from the academic approach (fig. 4). In the first case, it is a smaller, dense area covering the Visegrad Group as well as Austria and Germany. In the second case, the area is more blurred and vast. It covers both Denmark and numerous countries usually being part of Southern Europe.

**Fig. 3: Delimitation of Central Europe in the tourist approach**

**Fig. 4: Delimitation of Central Europe in the interdisciplinary approach**

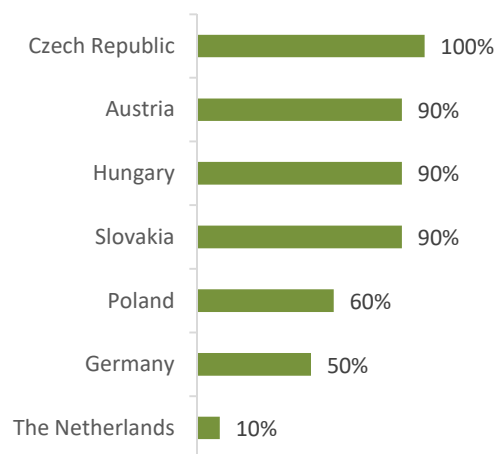
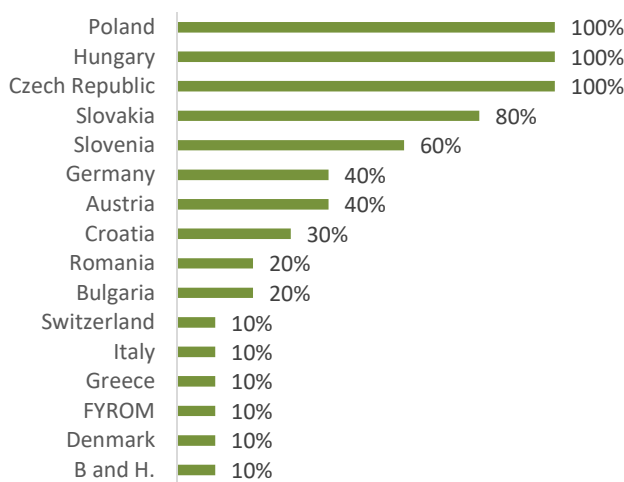


Source: authors' own processing, symbols in accordance with ISO 3166

It seems that the term "Central Europe" is interpreted more precisely in the tourist community than in the academic community. When positioning their offers as "Central Europe", tour operators are mainly guided by market reasons. They know that tourists are more willing to visit Prague than Warsaw. For that reason Poland ranks the lowest position among the V4 countries on the tourist map of Central Europe. However, Cracow, considered to be a symbol of Central Europe, often appears among Polish cities in the tourist offers of Central Europe (Agh, 1998).

**Fig. 5: Central European countries in the interdisciplinary approach**

**Fig. 6: Central European countries in the tourist approach**



Source: authors' own processing

Source: authors' own processing

## 5. Tourist products of the Visegrad Group and Central Europe

The Visegrad Group proposes 2 types of products: national (including attractions in individual countries) and transnational. The national products were grouped into 8 categories (tab. 3). Each category presents attractions located in the four Visegrad countries. Among these attractions are 65 cities, 45 sites on the UNESCO list, 29 religious sites and 36 places relating to "health and spa" tourism. A separate category is culinary attractions, including wine and beer produced in each of the Visegrad Group countries. By definition, the MICE product is not addressed to individual tourists, thus it is promoted in a different manner.

Tab. 3: Tourist products of the Visegrad Group

No.	Product	Description	Model product
1.	Cities and History	The product offers an individual visit to 65 cities (15 Czech cities, 19 Hungarian cities, 13 Polish cities, 18 Slovak cities). The product is based on the assumption that <i>"the cities are the most typical example of this cultural and intellectual cohesion: although different in many aspects, they vividly depict the most common features of the Central European region"</i> .	Ostrava (Czech Republic)
2.	UNESCO Heritage	The product offers an individual visit to 45 sites on the UNESCO heritage list (14 sites in the Czech Republic, 9 in Hungary, 14 in Poland, 8 in Slovakia). The product is based on the assumption that <i>"numerous sights registered on the UNESCO World Heritage list, including those of breath-taking beauty and levied with the burden of ages past, can be found throughout the countries of the Visegrad Group"</i> .	Warsaw (Poland)
3.	Spa and Health	The product offers an individual visit to 36 places relating to "spa and health" tourism (10 in the Czech Republic, 5 in Hungary, 21 in Slovakia). Poland presented its offer in a different manner, presenting 6 types of "spa and health" tourism. The product is based on the assumption that <i>"thermal waters and muds have a long tradition in the region, many of them known for centuries as centres of spa treatment and praised all over Europe and the rest of the world"</i> .	Bardejovské Kupele (Slovakia)
4.	Active Holiday	The product presents about a dozen offers of active holidays based on the main recreational forms (e.g. golf, cycling, skiing). Each of the countries presented its offer differently. The product is based on the assumption that <i>"the landscape of V4 countries is very diverse and therefore it offers a wide choice of sports and relaxing activities"</i> .	Golf (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia)
5.	Religious Heritage	The product offers an individual visit to 29 places relating to Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox and Jewish religions (11 places in Poland, 5 places in the Czech Republic, 9 places in Hungary, 4 places in Slovakia). The product is based on the assumption that <i>"the area of the Visegrad Group was mostly formed by Christian culture which was spread here till the end of the first millennium. But the region has always been a haven for settlers, including those of Jewish religion"</i> .	The Jasna Góra Monastery (Poland)
6.	Cuisine	The product presents 23 culinary offers (8 Czech, 4 Hungarian, 4 Slovak, and 7 Polish). The products are mostly national meals and dishes. The product is based on the assumption that <i>"thanks to its position in Central Europe the cuisine of the Visegrad Group was influenced by surrounding countries"</i> .	Wine (Hungary)
7.	MICE	The MICE product is only at the development stage. Details are given by 4 national "convention bureau" institutions.	-
8.	Tours and itineraries	The product is divided into 3 categories: "Country high lights", "Day trips", "Tours around Central Europe". The first two categories include national products, the third category contains 6 offers of trips across the Visegrad Region.	Behind the Iron Curtain (Hungary)

Source: authors' own processing

The transnational products include 6 thematic routes. Their duration is similar and ranges between 11 and 14 days. They were prepared mainly for motorised tourists. Each route runs across all V4 countries. Statistically, most of the time was planned for Poland and Slovakia. But it must be pointed out that the differences in the number of days spent in individual countries are small (tab. 4).

**Tab. 4: Cross-border tourist products of the Visegrad Group**

No.	Product	Days				
		Hungary	Poland	Czech Republic	Slovakia	Total
1.	Christian pilgrimage across Central Europe	3	4	1	4	12
2.	Shalom - Jewish Heritage	2	4	2	3	11
3.	SPA - pleasure for the body and the soul	3	3	4	4	14
4.	Castles and Chateaux in Central Europe	3	4	3	3	13
5.	Capitals - The many faces of Central Europe	3	4	4	3	14
6.	The UNESCO Sites - unforgettable wonders of Central Europe	3	3	3	3	12
<b>DAYS IN TOTAL</b>		<b>17</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>76</b>

Source: authors' own processing

Tour operators selling Central European products offer touring trips. The trips last from 7 to 14 days. The price of some of the products includes a flight (it mainly concerns travels from the US). All trips include accommodation and meals. Overnight stays are mainly planned in capital cities.

**Tab. 5: Tourist products of Central Europe**

No.	Product name	Tour operator	Product type	Content	Start of the event	Countries
1.	Central Europe	Cosmos	Touring trip	a 16-day coach trip with accommodation and meals, includes a guided visiting of Central European cities and attractions, including 8 sites on the UNESCO list	Germany	Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Germany, Austria
2.	Best of Central Europe	Intrepid	Touring trip	a 15-day trip by train and by your own mode of transport across Central Europe with partial meals and accommodation, includes cycling, travelling by underground and taxi	Austria	Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Austria
3.	Tailor Made Hungary, Austria & Czech Republic: Capitals of Central Europe	Abercrombie & Kent	Touring and long-stay trip	a 10-day event including 3 overnight stays in 3 capitals respectively, travelling by train and in your own mode of transport	Hungary	Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary
4.	9 Day Classic Central Europe	Gate1Travel	Touring trip	a 9-day coach trip with a flight and travelling by coach across 4 Central European capital cities, includes accommodation and meals	United States	Austria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary
5.	Tsentrálnaya Evropa	Akropol	Touring trip	a 7-day coach trip across 4 Central European countries with accommodation and meals	Russia	Poland, Germany, the Czech Republic, Austria,

No.	Product name	Tour operator	Product type	Content	Start of the event	Countries
6.	Praha - Krakov - Vysoké Tatry - Bratislava - Praha autobusem	Cedok	Touring trip	a 7-day coach trip across Central Europe. Includes accommodation and meals	Czech Republic	Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia
7.	9-Days Classic Central Europe	Ziggy's Tours	Touring trip	a 9-day trip with a flight and travelling by coach across 4 capital cities of Central Europe, includes accommodation and meals	United States	the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Austria
8.	Capitales Centroeuropeas	Tour Europa	Touring trip	a 10-day coach trip across 5 Central European countries	Czech Republic	the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Austria, Germany
9.	10-Day Central Europe Tour Package	Tours4fun	Touring trip	a 10-day coach trip with accommodation and meals across 6 Central European countries	Austria	the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Austria, Germany, the Netherlands
10.	Central Europe awaits to be explored!	Artur Travel	Touring trip	a 7-day coach trip with accommodation and meals across 4 Central European countries	Hungary	Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary,

Source: authors' own processing

The mode of transport for travelling across Central Europe is usually the coach. There are also offers that include travelling by train and in your own mode of transport. Some tour operators add cycling and travelling by underground and taxi to their itineraries. It must be pointed out that each of the trips includes the Czech Republic, which means that this country is particularly attractive. If the trip starts in a V4 country, it is either the Czech Republic or Hungary.

## Conclusion

The use of the "Central Europe" brand to promote tourism in the Visegrad Group is reasonable and justified. The method used by the authors has shown that the Visegrad Group is a part of the concept of Central Europe both in the interdisciplinary and tourist approach. It has been proved that the Visegrad Group is a part of the concept of Central Europe both in the interdisciplinary and tourist approach. It would be difficult to find a better concept of the tourist promotion of the V4. However, it must be noted that the biggest beneficiary of such branding is the Czech Republic, and the smallest one is Poland. The Visegrad Group covers an extremely attractive area for tourists, which is reflected in tourist products prepared by national tourist organisations. These products are competing, but joint promotion generates synergic effects for all stakeholders.

The recommendation is to increase the number of cross-border products as most of the products promoted by the V4 are national products. The Visegrad Group focuses on products of cultural and religious tourism. It promotes products of active and country tourism to a lesser extent.

On the other hand, tour operators offer very similar transnational products, i.e. 2-week or so touring trips across Central European cities. Capital cities and sites on the UNESCO list are very popular as such products are bestsellers. According to tour operators, Central Europe is not only the V4, it is also Austria. Central Europe is similarly interpreted on the "Visit Europe" website. It would be beneficial for the V4 to merge this website with "Discover Central Europe", provided that the European Travel Commission approves it. It is important to admit



that „Slavkov triangle“ (called Austerlitz Triangle) consisting of Austria, Czech Republic and Slovakia is becoming a rival to a Visegrad Group (Kalan, 2015) and an alternative destination of Central Europe.

The current tourist promotion of the "European Quartet" focused on external markets, mostly on markets outside Europe. The intraregional integration is very weak. A recommendation for the future is to prepare and promote tourist products dedicated to residents of the Visegrad Group. It would not only help to use the tourist potential of this region better but also would deepen the social integration of the Visegrad Group.

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