

Sharing real experience

"We are not trying to paint the V4 in pink colours; on the contrary we are making an effort to define the mistakes we made so that countries we are supporting can try to avoid them," Petr Vágner, the executive director of the International Visegrad Fund, said in an interview with The Slovak Spectator.

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Business links

When looking carefully at economic aspects of cooperation in the Visegrad Group, experts cite the need to keep the region economically competitive and to make a successful transition from traditional industries to knowledge-based ones.

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The importance of V4

The Slovak Spectator spoke with Tomáš Strážay, a research fellow working with the Slovak Foreign Policy Association about the strategic importance of the Visegrad Group, its newest challenges and about building cross-border cooperation.

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Student exchanges

While most students from the region still prefer to head westwards to 'check out' the better study conditions in western European countries and the US, Visegrad leaders are encouraging more student exchanges within the region as well as with its eastern and southern neighbours.

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Touring the region

The tourist boards of all four countries have teamed up to promote the entire Visegrad region to distant overseas tourists. Even though institutionalised cooperation in cross-border tourism does not yet exist among the V4 countries, each country perceives its neighbours as important visitors for their domestic tourism industry.

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NGOs in the region

What makes NGOs in the V4 countries different in their approach to development aid is their concrete experience in transition countries, specifically of the transformation and reform of political systems, the economy, and the rule of law.

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V4 in allegro

The Visegrad Cello Quartet shows that long-distance relationships can work. The quartet regularly sells out concert halls across central Europe.

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Visegrad Castle in Hungary, which gave the Visegrad Group its name.

Photo: Zuzana Fülöppová

Sharing Visegrad spirit

WHAT characteristics do Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland want the Visegrad region to have in a decade or two? How can these four countries help other countries in neighbouring regions to firmly join the zone of political and economic stability? What issues can help these neighbours to forget their historical disputes and cultural differences and focus on things that make the region a stronger and more viable force to effectively defend regional interests? Gábor Iklódy, State Secretary and Political Director of the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Emanuela Suprowicz, the Deputy National Coordinator of Visegrad Cooperation for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Poland, Peter Stano, spokesperson for the Slovak Foreign Affairs Ministry and Milan Řepka, spokesperson for the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs have been seeking answers to questions like these and shared their views in interviews with The Slovak Spectator.

The Slovak Spectator (TSS): In which fields can the potential of the Visegrad region as a whole be best used? Which areas of further cooperation do you consider a priority?

Milan Řepka (MR): The presiding country of the Visegrad Group presents a proposal for priorities and, after consultations and approval from the other countries, the programme of the presiding country turns into the official priorities of the group for the next year. Hungary took over the presidency in July 2009 and among their main priorities are Euro-Atlantic integration of the western Balkan countries, the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership, cooperation in the economic development area and several forms of cooperation in the V4+ format, for example with Ukraine, Belarus, Japan or Benelux. As for the departmental cooperation, the leading issues are minorities, energy security and the financial crisis.

Gábor Iklódy (GI): We strive to effectively represent our common interests in the European Union or to make an active contribution to the development of EU policies. The four

BY BEATA BALOGOVÁ &
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countries regularly consult about issues on the EU agenda as well as coordinate their approach to other significant topics. The Hungarian presidency, which started in July, will focus on the integration of the western Balkans into the Euro-Atlantic structures while maintaining the commitments to the EU and assisting the takeoff of the Eastern Partnership initiative. We wish to invigorate consultations in issues of energy policies and energy safety, as well as the development of North-South road, railway and energy corridors and connections with the use of EU funds. We would also monitor where we stand on common ground regarding the future of EU cohesion policies as well as in making use of EU resources more dynamic. More intense cooperation in the integration of the Roma community is on our agenda as well.

Emanuela Suprowicz (ES): The V4 has a unique potential deriving from its ad hoc consultation mechanism that may be used for any purpose and which provides the much needed flexibility for effective cooperation in any field as required by circumstances. Cooperation within the Visegrad Group is not limited to the area of culture and education, although these are predominant areas in terms of projects carried out through funding from the International Visegrad Fund. Our countries cooperate on both the political and experts' level in all possible domains of public administration whether it concerns infrastructure, preservation of endangered species, military issues or sports and tourism. Currently, energy security in the region is increasingly assuming a top priority on the V4 agenda, just like the issue of stability of neighbouring regions.

Peter Stano (PS): We see untapped cooperation opportunities in, for instance, the more successful promotion of common pragmatic projects in the

areas of science and research or in better promotion of the V4 brand within Europe. We believe that in this time of global economic crisis the V4 could support even more regional cooperation among small and medium-sized enterprises and closer contacts between regional chambers of commerce. The Visegrad countries will remain, naturally, the first countries among which Slovakia seeks allies within the EU. We are not seeking to enlarge the grouping, but we definitely support cooperation with other countries.

TSS: One of the current priorities of V4 countries is passing on their experiences with integration into NATO and the EU to countries which are seeking to join the Euro-Atlantic structures in the future. What can V4 offer these countries?

MR: The V4 countries in this respect mainly focus on the countries of the western Balkans and countries that fall under the dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy. In this area, the International Visegrad Fund plays a very important role, as its grant and scholarship programmes represent a significant tool to fulfil the aims of the V4 countries to support the democratisation and transformation processes in southeast and eastern Europe.

GI: The Visegrad countries have a shared interest in the democratization of neighbouring regions, especially the western Balkans and our eastern neighbours. The V4 countries have transformational and transitional experiences relevant for these partners. Then the V4 is an important forum for sharing experiences about regional cooperation, since cooperation between the regions might work as an important engine for the development of these regions. The support provided by the International Visegrad Fund is also an effective tool for sharing integration experiences. With the use of the fund's resources we are able to run Belarusian, Ukrainian and western Balkan scholarships as well as a programme to support building democracies in Belarus, Serbia and Georgia.

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History of V4

ON FEBRUARY 15, 1991 the President of the Czechoslovak Republic, Václav Havel, the President of the Republic of Poland, Lech Wałęsa, and the Prime Minister of the Republic of Hungary, József Antall, met in Visegrad, Hungary and agreed on the creation of an informal grouping of the three central European countries, the Visegrad Group.

The location of the meeting, which also lent its name to the group, provided a symbolic historical arch linking this meeting to a similar gathering, which took place there in 1335, attended by John of Luxembourg, King of Bohemia, Charles Robert, King of Hungary, and Casimir III, King of Poland. Both meetings aimed at intensifying cooperation and friendship among the three central European states.

The formation of the Visegrad Group was motivated by four factors: the need to eliminate any hangovers of communist rule in central Europe; the desire to overcome historic animosities among central European countries; the belief that through joint effort they would be able to achieve goals bringing about social and economic transformation and entering the European integration process; and a method to find common ground for the goals and policies of the governments.

Following the division of Czechoslovakia in 1993, the Visegrad Group expanded to four countries, with both the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic becoming members.

Cooperation between countries in the Visegrad Group is not institutionalised in any way. Cooperation flows solely on the basis of periodic meetings of representatives from each country at various levels: from prime ministers and presidents to gatherings of experts.

A summit meeting of prime ministers takes place annually. One of the V4 countries holds the presidency between summits and is responsible for drafting a one-year plan of action. The only organisational support structure within the Visegrad Group is the International Visegrad Fund, which supports the development of cooperation in culture, scientific fields, research, education, student exchanges, cross-border cooperation at the local level and promotion of tourism.

Compiled by Spectator staff
from www.visegradgroup.eu

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Sharing what Visegrad countries have learned

BY BEATA BALOGOVÁ
Spectator staff

WHAT Petr Vágner likes about the International Visegrad Fund (IVF) is that it is a living organism, able to adjust to the changing needs of the Visegrad Four countries, from the challenge of integrating Roma into the respective societies, to energy and environmental safety, and assisting regions in need. The IVF has had a role in transferring the integration experiences of the V4 group to countries which are pursuing the goal of joining European and Euro-Atlantic groupings.

In an interview with The Slovak Spectator, Vágner, who is the executive director of the IVF, said: "We are not trying to paint the V4 in pink colours; on the contrary we are making an effort to define the mistakes we have made so that the countries we are supporting can try to avoid them."

The Slovak Spectator (TSS): You are now managing a fund which has played an active role in assisting integration in the central European region: within the Visegrad Group countries and beyond their borders. How do you assess its operation and what do you see as its main role in the future?

Petr Vágner (PV): When we were setting up the fund it really had not occurred to me that one day I might be sitting here and talking to a journalist as its executive director. At that time, the main goal was to reinforce unity and solidarity between the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. It was pretty much the main objective while initially the fund worked with a €1 million budget. Now, for 2010, we are working with a €6 million budget and the fund has grown into an institution supporting projects of regional, cross-border cooperation in areas of education, culture, youth exchange and science. In fact, the budget of the fund gets regularly extended, along with the areas that the fund's operations cover.

The IVF gradually moved its focus from only internal cooperation to also widening the ring of prosperity and stability in neighbouring regions going through transition, mostly in eastern Europe and the western Balkans.

One of the important steps was the founding of scholarships which initially financed the study of Visegrad students outside of the V4, particularly in Western countries. This format disappeared after the four countries entered the European Union. Now we have scholarships to support the movement of our students within the Visegrad region and in some eastern and Balkan countries, programmes for students from eastern Europe, especially Ukraine and Belarus, but also for south Caucasus countries and the countries of the Balkans.

TSS: Is there enough interest in these scholarships? Do they re-



Petr Vágner, executive director of IVF

Photo: Jana Liptáková

spond effectively to the changing conditions in those countries?

PV: The countries I listed are quite well-informed about the scholarships. I worked for four years in Ukraine and I recall that students there had an interest in these scholarships. The fund has really been a living organism, which evolved according to the needs of the region and how circumstances were changing in those countries. For example, scholarships for Ukrainian students were a kind of reaction to the Orange Revolution and started with supporting Ukrainian post-graduates. Today, there is a demand for master's degree programmes as well. The advantage we offer is that there is not much bureaucracy involved. If the application is well-prepared and the student has a clear idea what to study and where, getting a scholarship is possible without major obstacles. Of course, our capacity is not unlimited.

There are no priority areas in scholarships, though I personally would prefer some. Students interested in IVF scholarships should choose such specializations which they will be able to use after their return home. There is not any doubt how interesting, for instance, research on Czech history could be but the possibility to find work in this branch is not too high. I am not saying that IVF should not support this and similar scholarships but the interest to have needed specialists should prevail.

The key requirement, however, is that an applicant finds a school within the Visegrad group willing to accept the student. The students are welcomed since each school receives €1,500 per student each semester. We provide a scholar-

ship of €2,500 per one semester, which seems to me quite generous support since within the Visegrad Group countries €500 per month is a sufficient sum.

TSS: One of the V4 countries' priorities is the transfer of experiences with integration into NATO and the EU to countries that aspire to enter the Euro-Atlantic structures. Which countries are in need of such know-how and what can V4 countries offer them?

PV: Countries which were a part of the so-called socialist camp walked through a very similar historical path in the second half of the 20th century. V4 countries managed quite quickly to overcome their difficult heritage from this period and to become a part of the Euro-Atlantic community. It is now our moral duty to help countries which have been not so successful yet to overcome difficulties that we faced during the transition process. The IVF indeed applies the strategy shared by each V4 member towards countries of the eastern countries and the western Balkans.

The projects, of course, have various characteristics including providing experiences from the transformation process to experts from these countries. We also involve students from these regions by granting them scholarships and allowing them to experience the actual results of the transformation process. The third type of project is transferring experiences to journalists and educators at seminars and workshops when they travel to the V4 region and have an opportunity to observe some of the changes here. Of course, they are the ones to decide what is useful for them and what is not. There is a very important aspect: we are

not trying to paint V4 in pink colours. On the contrary we are making an effort to define the mistakes we have made so that the countries we are supporting can try to avoid them.

The IVF supports, for example, cooperation between towns which I find to be a very useful initiative. In Ukraine I had a chance to see how this initiative worked in real life. When local administration representatives get a chance to come to the V4, to meet their colleagues and see how things are done here then the mayors find some common ground since the problems are very similar: how to fill the towns' coffers or how to dispose of communal waste.

When it comes to transferring historical knowledge, our advantage is that we share similar historical experiences and we are able to transfer it to Ukraine or Belarus somehow more effectively than some western countries, which do not actually have our experiences.

TSS: Prime ministers of the V4 countries at their last meeting in Poland decided to increase the budget of the fund. How have they justified this decision in these times of economic downturn?

PV: Nearly every year at their summit the prime ministers have increased the amount of support for the fund, which really shows that the political elites are aware of its importance. What comes as a pleasant surprise is that the economic crisis has not yet influenced our projects and the prime ministers have approved a €1 million increase to our budget. The support has its logic though, since the fund has been helping to push through political objectives that V4 countries share: supporting mutuality and solidarity among the members and strengthening communication between neighbours.

TSS: The fund has contributed to more intense movement of young people within V4 countries and the surrounding regions. How has the fund achieved this?

PV: We have already spoken about IVF scholarships which are possible to take as the most important means helping movement by our young people, but not only them. IVF actively supports programmes oriented on creating links among different groups of people with the same interests, sport tournaments, art exhibitions, theatre festivals, etc. There is also an opportunity to develop relations among villages, towns or regions.

TSS: Countries of the V4 are culturally close but in a sense also very diverse. Is there something like a common culture of the Visegrad region?

PV: The fund aspires to bring national cultures closer but I do not think this should ultimately lead to the creation of some kind of 'Visegrad culture'.

International Visegrad Fund

The International Visegrad Fund is an international organisation based in Bratislava, founded by the governments of the countries of the Visegrad Group (V4), the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland, and the Slovak Republic on June 9, 2000.

The purpose of the fund is to promote closer cooperation among V4 countries (and other countries) through the support of common cultural, scientific and educational projects, youth exchanges, cross-border projects and tourism promotion.

The budget of the fund (€6 million for 2010) comes from equal contributions from the governments of V4 countries. The fund provides support through four grant programmes, three scholarship schemes and artist residencies. Among the recipients of the fund's support are mainly non-governmental organisations, municipalities and local and regional governments, schools and universities, as well as private companies and individual citizens.

The governing bodies of the fund are the Conference of Ministers of Foreign Affairs and the Council of Ambassadors.

IVF Grants

Small Grants

- to support projects in the fields of cultural cooperation, scientific exchange and research, education, exchanges between young people, cross-border cooperation and promotion of tourism
- maximum contribution: €5,000, which cannot exceed 50% of the total project costs including the in-kind contribution of the applicant or in-kind contributions of other participants. The maximum time for a proposed budget is six months

Annual budget: €512,000

Deadlines: First day of March, June, September and December

Standard Grants

- the field of activities is identical to that of the Small Grant programme
- the amount of funding provided to projects through the Standard Grant scheme, however, is higher than €5,000 (minimum of €5,001) and the time frame for implementation of the projects is 12 months

- the financial contribution of the fund cannot exceed 50% of the total project costs including the in-kind contribution of the applicant or in-kind contributions by other participants

Annual budget: €2,200,000

Deadlines: 15th day of March and September

Visegrad Strategic Programme

- to support long-term projects of a strategic nature that link institutions of all four Visegrad Group countries
- projects must adhere to at least one of the priorities defined by the Conference of Ministers for the given year, which follow the foreign policy priorities of the Presidency of the Visegrad Group
- 2010 priorities: V4 Response to the Decade of Roma Inclusion, Building a Green Visegrad, Sharing V4 Know-How with Neighbouring Regions, V4 Promotion

- maximum time frame for the implementation of the grants is three years

- the financial contribution of the Fund cannot exceed 50% of the total project costs, including the in-kind contribution of the applicant, or in-kind contributions by other participants

Annual budget: €300,000

Deadline: February 15 (for 2010)

Visegrad University Studies Grant (VUSG)

- to promote and support the development of outstanding university courses or study programmes that deal with specific phenomena explicitly related to the Visegrad Group countries

- a lump-sum, one-installment grant awarded to selected university departments, schools or faculties that can document a prepared syllabus/curriculum for such a course/programme and confirm its planned long-term enrollment in a given curriculum

Annual budget: €100,000

Next deadline: November 10

Source: www.visegradfund.org



The environment is among the priorities of V4 cooperation.

Photo: Courtesy of Villa Decius Association

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Business prospects in V4

BY JANA LIPTÁKOVÁ
Spectator staff

THE VISEGRAD Group represents a consistent geographical region on the eastern border of the European Union. This makes the region strategically important and also creates opportunities for the group's member states – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia – to utilise their partnership at the regional level as well as within the European Union, though they often regard each other as competitors rather than friends, even after 20 years of systemic changes.

Energy security is the most oft-mentioned challenge now facing the Visegrad Group (V4), while others include the further enlargement of the EU and handling the impacts of the global economic crisis. When looking more closely at economic aspects, experts cite the need to keep the Visegrad region competitive and secure a successful transition from traditional industries to knowledge-based ones.

"The gas crisis in January 2009 showed that energy security is of key importance for the economic development of the region," Alexander Duleba, the director of the Research Centre of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (SFPA), told The Slovak Spectator. "There are no regional interconnections of infrastructure for transit of natural gas and crude oil within the V4. If the V4 arrangement is not used to bring about a change, this will cast doubt on the pure essence of regional cooperation within the V4."

Along with energy security, Krzysztof Szczerski, an expert at the Kosciuszko Institute in Poland, sees as an important challenge for the V4 in not being left outside the core of European integration following turbulence from global crises which threaten to divide the EU into several 'inner-circles'.

"If we fail in these areas we will become an unimportant part of the EU's eastern periphery," Szczerski told The Slovak Spectator.

For the Visegrad region it is of strategic importance to advocate the eastern dimension in the context of possible future enlargement of the EU, according to Szczerski.

The Visegrad region has also not escaped the impacts of the current global economic crisis.

"Looking at the current economic crisis, there is no doubt that the V4 region is affected by certain negative consequences from that crisis," Daneš Brzica, who works with the Institute of Economic Research of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, told The Slovak Spectator. "Among these is certainly the very critical continuing process of company relocations, general decline in industrial production, stagnation of the real estate sector and cautious consumer behaviour. The challenge is therefore to avoid the further decline of national economies, promote confidence in those economies and to prepare for future opportunities when recovery occurs."

According to Brzica, the strategic importance of the region will



Energy security is a hot V4 topic.

Photo: Jana Liptáková

depend critically on its ability to increase competitiveness and maintain and improve social cohesion.

"A successful transition from traditional industries to knowledge-based ones seems crucial for the region to remain competitive," he said. "Under some pessimistic scenarios one could also expect some worsening of the situation in regional competitiveness. Fortunately, despite some negative signs – like the increasing unemployment rate in Slovakia, and problems in Hungary – so far we have evidence of a rather good position across the region as a whole."

Joint progress in some areas

The major force behind the economic development of the V4 countries will remain their export orientation and foreign direct investment. But the V4 countries, except for Poland, lack domestic sources for sustainable and long-term growth, according to Tamás Novák, a senior research fellow working with the Institute for World Economics of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

"Due to this fact the economic development path of the countries is expected to be quite similar over the next few years," he told The Slovak Spectator. "These characteristics reinforce the competing nature of their economies. Only large-scale, region-wide investment projects can be important for all the affected countries, in order to unite their forces, but it requires strong political will and a cooperative approach. The latter is obviously lacking due mostly to political problems between Hungary and Slovakia."

Brzica sees the largest potential for cooperation within the V4 in tourism, services, manufacturing, chemical production or agriculture. On the other hand, agriculture in particular is a sector where traditional national protectionism is fully supported by many politicians and, due to EU policy, competition is undermined, resulting in problems with competitiveness.

"Cooperation is useful when it is voluntary," said Brzica. "This is important in business and also in the public sphere. A certain institutional environment is needed, but it is critical to have enough individuals, firms and politicians willing to promote international and cross-border cooperation."

The V4 in the EU

While the territorial proximity of the V4 countries can be beneficial when pursuing cross-border cooperation, Novák does not see many issues as being common to all V4 members.

"Experience since EU accession clearly proves that the number of issues bearing a central European identity has been limited or non-existent," he told The Slovak Spectator. "The countries from the region still regard each other as competitors rather than friends and that, after 20 years of systemic changes, is not very promising. In spite of this, the four countries could certainly find issues of strategic and regional importance, such as environmental problems."

Szczerski views the benefits of V4 membership within the EU in the context of cohesion with regard to the EU budget – mostly via Structural Funds' interventions but also via the Common Agricultural Policy.

"That is why it is very important to form a cohesion-friendly coalition among V4 states in the next budgetary negotiations," he said. "These negotiations in their early stages may begin during the Polish presidency of the Council (in the second half of 2011), together with the closure of the budget mid-term review which will occur under the Hungarian Presidency, preceding the Polish one. These circumstances show how important our common policy stands may be in the coming years."

Cross-border cooperation

Cooperation is not limited to V4 member states only given that psychological proximity among traditional partners promotes contacts of various kinds.

"We have Austria as a neighbour, with its high socio-economic potential, and our firms and other business actors naturally balance or diversify their territorial presence," Brzica said.

According to Brzica, territorial proximity is a good basis for cross-border cooperation, which can be beneficial for all V4 members and their many, especially smaller, firms. The same holds for local governments, as is known from European cross-border projects in which they actively participate to obtain funding for projects aimed at improving social and economic

conditions as well as cultural relations with neighbouring cross-border regions.

The V4 regularly cooperates with other countries in central Europe – with Austria and Slovenia within the so-called Regional Partnership, and with the V4's eastern neighbours as part of the so-called V4+ concept. Moreover, the V4 closely cooperates also with various regional groups of countries in the EU, specifically the Benelux countries, the countries of the Nordic Council of Ministers and countries of the western Balkans, he said.

Duleba, from the SFPA, sees cross-border cooperation as being of key importance for the economic development and revitalisation of the region.

"Five years in the EU have shown that the importance of the single, border-free market for goods, services and capital is huge," said Duleba. "The V4 region represents a natural entity from the viewpoint of history and cultural mentality, and the values of the population. Large investment projects in the region would be possible only to a very limited extent if the V4 countries were not part of the single EU market and the market in the region was segmented into small national states."

According to Duleba, the single market is of high importance also for border regions, because it enables access to the markets of neighbouring countries. Here he mentions the industrial region of northern Moravia in the Czech Republic, which creates jobs also for Slovaks and Poles. The carmaker Kia Motors Slovakia near Žilina similarly offers jobs to Poles as well as new business opportunities to subcontractors.

Further east

Twenty years after the fall of the Iron Curtain and the collapse of economic cooperation within the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance – also known as Comecon – there remains the question of whether former members of the council now clustered in the V4 can utilise some advantages when doing business with former Soviet republics.

Novák does not see any specific advantages in this respect.

"The advantages stem from economic development and EU membership," he told The Slovak Spectator.

Brzica thinks that while 15 years ago one would have immediately responded that such advantages were knowledge of language or traditional long-term business relations, the situation has substantially changed.

"Nowadays the situation is more structured – some firms have been active in continually developing existing relations with those countries since 1989, while other firms have gradually reoriented their operations towards Western markets," he said. "In any case, there is a huge opportunity to benefit from doing business with many post-Soviet republics, or, if the Soviet bloc is more broadly conceived, with other post-communist countries of central and eastern Europe."

To read the whole article, please go to www.spectator.sk

Macroeconomic outlook and challenges in the V4

BY TAMÁS NOVÁK
Special to the Spectator

INTERNATIONAL economic relations between countries in central Europe underwent radical change between 2004 and 2007 on account of the two waves of European Union enlargement, which created new conditions for economic development and convergence.

EU accession lent new momentum to the economic growth and therefore convergence of all the new member states, including the V4 countries – with the exception of Hungary, where the initially higher rate of growth had slowed substantially by 2007 and living standards, measured in terms of per capita GDP, have merely stagnated since joining the EU in contrast to the dynamic growth recorded in the other new member states. Hungary's per capita GDP figure stagnated between 2004 and 2008 at a time when the other members of the V4 converged by more than 8 percent, on average, towards the living standards of the more developed EU countries. On the whole, the region developed at a pace rarely seen before in its economic history and accelerated the rate of convergence, though it will be practically impossible to repeat this in the near future. The economies in the central European region are supposed to formulate radically different economic strategies under the new domestic and international conditions.

Surprisingly for many, new euro area members – Slovakia and Slovenia – are heading towards an increasingly severe downturn in growth in comparison to what was previously expected. Slovakia's opportunities for growth are very much limited in the current situation by the country's vulnerability linked to its one-sided economic structure. The automobile industry is very sensitive to cyclical trends, and the crisis has hit this sector extremely hard, even in spite of the measures taken by government to stimulate demand in the sector. In the long run it may even be questionable just how much an economic structure based on the car industry will be capable – if at all – of reaching previous levels of growth.

The Czech Republic and Poland have relatively stable fundamentals. In Poland, management of the crisis has not taken the form of bank bailout packages or international loans linked to economic conditions but in a continuation of the structural reforms that had already been launched.

However, this only partly explains the endurance of the country vis-a-vis the crisis: what is even more important is that it has a very large domestic economy by central European standards and, relatively speaking, is less open, which means changes in international demand do not af-

fect it as much; additionally, domestic demand together with the domestic market are able to reduce the pace of the economic slowdown. Nonetheless, the fact that the IMF provided Poland with a flexible credit facility in spring 2009 to overcome any unexpected financial difficulties just demonstrates the unpredictable and increasingly severe consequences of the crisis. It is important to note that this credit facility can be used at any time and is not tied to any conditions, i.e. it is only there as a safety net.

The Czech Republic enjoys relatively stable macroeconomic conditions, but external demand is much more important than for Poland which is why the Czech economy is set for much more challenging times over the coming period than Poland's; however, given its features, the economy it is now likened more to healthier Poland than to other economies in the region.

Hungary does not really "stand out" from the other economies in central Europe in terms of expected growth. Yet because of the country's vulnerability and its level of debt it is more often than not grouped with the Baltic states. For this reason there are no reserves which could provide more budgetary options, as is the case in more stable countries (such as the Czech Republic and Poland), nor are there any tools available to stabilise the situation, such as the euro in Slovakia, while the domestic market is too small on its own to stabilise demand.

What should not be forgotten is that thanks to the stabilisation measures taken, demand had narrowed significantly and the economy had slowed down in Hungary even before the crisis erupted.

The EU member states in central Europe can be classified into several groups based on their economic features and outlooks.

One common thread, however, is that the deepening crisis requires significant adjustment from them all. This means either improving the budget position or the external equilibrium, which everywhere goes hand in hand with a decline in economic output and a rise in unemployment. Stabilising the situation essentially depends on how the international funding situation pans out. If the financing and demand problems persist in the long term, this will have dramatic effects even on countries that are in the most stable positions.

Paradoxically, a protracted crisis will trigger structural reforms and significant adjustments more quickly for countries in a worse position from a long-term economic development perspective.

This is why the conditions for long-term growth may turn out favourably in the countries most affected – presuming they follow a satisfactory economic policy.

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The importance of V4

BY JANA LIPTÁKOVÁ
Spectator staff

THE VISEGRAD Group (V4) was first formed as an informal grouping with one of its primary aims being to support integration of its four member states - the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia - into the EU. That goal was fulfilled more than five years ago but since then the V4 has proven its viability by taking on new challenges in the further enlargement of the EU by cooperating with countries currently outside the union as well by pursuing energy security in the Visegrad region.

The Slovak Spectator spoke about the strategic importance of the Visegrad Group, its newest challenges and about cross-border cooperation with Tomáš Strážay, a research fellow working with the Research Centre of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association.

The Slovak Spectator (TSS): How have the key objectives of the Visegrad Group changed after the admission of its members to the EU?

Tomáš Strážay (TS): The Visegrad Group, which will celebrate its 20th anniversary in 2011, has proven that it is the most effective regional grouping in central Europe created first for cooperation by three and later four countries. Of course, there were some problematic moments and for a certain time the cooperation was halted, but later it was revitalised.

Now the V4 is in the post-EU admission phase and cooperation among the countries is gaining a new dimension. Before 2004 the main goal of all V4 countries was integration into Euro-Atlantic structures: accession to the European Union and to NATO. The key objectives of V4 countries began to change after this main priority was fulfilled. It took the V4 member states a certain time to define their new priorities. There were some declarations; specifically I have in mind the Kroměříž declaration of 2004 in which the V4 countries declared their determination to continue further developing their cooperation as member states of the EU and NATO. These included intensification of cooperation on the European as well as the regional level, searching for new themes, among which was, for example, cooperation with eastern neighbours of the EU as well within the V4 states, support to the further enlargement of EU and other themes linked with deeper and greater integration of V4 countries into the EU.

These were priorities which V4 defined during the post-entry period and I think that now there is a new shift because after 2004 there were also some sceptical voices doubting the need of Visegrad cooperation.

Fortunately, the pragmatic interests of V4 countries in cooperating with each other and creating a grouping, comparable in its importance with other regional initiatives as Benelux or the Nordic Council, overcame the sceptics. I think that this has been already fulfilled to a certain degree.

TSS: What are the main challenges which the V4 will face in the following years?

TS: The challenges we face now are to a certain degree interconnected with EU policies or the operation of V4 countries within international organisations such as NATO and OSCE, but also within the EU itself. I think that the main European themes will dominate. This will include going forward in cooperation with eastern neighbours within the new initiative of the EU, the Eastern Partnership. This initiative was launched under the Czech EU

ives of V4 departments who would regularly discuss energy security issues. There are efforts to strengthen these consultation mechanisms also because of the possibility of a future energy crisis.

The natural gas crisis at the start of 2009, when the Czech Republic and other Visegrad partners helped Slovakia to tackle its gas shortage after Ukraine cut the flow of gas proved the need for better cooperation in this field. For example, transition networks between V4 states are not completely interconnected and that is a significant problem.



Slovak and Czech firms are cooperating in nuclear energy. Photo: SITA

presidency during the first half of 2009. Furthermore, it is support to countries of the western Balkans and their integration into EU. Here V4 countries can not only 'give them a lecture' but can also provide concrete information about problematic issues the V4 countries faced on the way to the EU accession so that the Balkan states can avoid these mistakes.

Energy security is a huge theme touching upon all of the V4 countries, within which new forms for greater cooperation are being pursued. I think that regarding this area, not all possibilities within the region have been fully used so far.

TSS: What challenges does energy security include?

TS: Searching for possibilities on how to make cooperation in energy security more effective is a distinctive theme. This is because cooperation within the V4 since the very beginning has been institutionalised only to a small degree. The Visegrad Group was in fact launched as an informal grouping which has had only one formal institution since 2000: the International Visegrad Fund. And now no political will exists to set up any other institutions. This has pros as well as cons. The pros are that in this way the group is flexible and able to respond more quickly to various challenges from outside as well as inside. On the other hand, a coordination body is missing which could better coordinate activities of individual partners. Because Visegrad cooperation is not more institutionalised, decisions taken on the V4 level have only the character of recommendations.

The Polish as well as the Czech presidencies of V4 endeavoured in some ways to institutionalise meetings of relevant representat-

Another theme related to energy security is the use of nuclear energy within which Slovakia and the Czech Republic have already created a tandem approach supported by other V4 states.

These all are themes which are also interesting for Russia and Ukraine and to which V4 can provide a certain 'added value'. These all are directions in which V4 cooperation may further develop.

In fact, all themes and projects related to transmission of electricity or hydrocarbons, for example the Nabucco pipeline, are touching upon all central European countries with regards to their position on the outer borders of the EU. Closely connected with this is the significant engagement of the V4 countries in the Eastern Partnership (EaP), which was inaugurated in Prague in May 2009. The main aim of the partnership is to improve the political and economic trade relations of six post-Soviet states of "strategic importance" - Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia - with EU.

TSS: Since there is no political will to create new V4 institutions, how can further cooperation develop?

TS: Within the V4 there is a tendency to create new mechanisms for cooperation within the existing framework. There is being discussed, for example, the principle of a priori solidarity. This means that if a V4 member state has a dispute about a specific topic with a third party, a country outside V4, it would get certain a priori support from other V4 partners. Today, this does not exist.

The Visegrad partnership also offers space to better utilize the presidency of the EU among the V4 countries for strengthening

regional cooperation and also to raise regional themes created within V4 to the EU level. I think that the Eastern Partnership project also shows that central European countries may be able to make a significant contribution also to EU policies or for policies of other international organisations.

TSS: What is the importance of cross-border cooperation in economic development of the region?

TS: With regards to cross-border cooperation, this is a very fundamental theme within V4, but the dimension I would like to stress is cross-border cooperation with countries neighbouring the EU and V4, especially Ukraine. Here V4 countries can contribute in a more significant or more innovative way because they know these border regions. There is also no fundamental language barrier, except for in Hungary, and the number of joint projects has been increasing.

The V4+ mechanism also has a great perspective because it enables countries outside V4 'to associate' to V4 for a certain period of time and cooperate intensively in fields interesting for both the V4 countries and countries outside the group. This is a format which serves for better communication with countries outside V4 and, paradoxically, these are not only countries neighbouring the Visegrad region, but also, for example Japan and Israel. Cooperation within this mechanism is variable, for instance in economic issues or agriculture, but its objective may also be the EU accession agenda as is the case of the Balkan countries. It depends on the needs of the external countries and the interest of V4 countries to accept or not such offers for cooperation. Here the space for cooperation is very extensive.

TSS: Before EU admission the V4 countries helped each other jointly to reach this goal. To what extent should such V4 solidarity be in place with regards to efforts to gain, for example, foreign investments?

TS: During the pre-entry period solidarity existed among the V4 countries, but each country also fought for itself. And now a very natural rivalry exists in the region. I would not employ any models of solidarity or continuity here. These belong, rather, to strategic decisions and strategic frameworks where a consensus should exist and does exist. V4 states do not agree on all issues but this does not mean that they will accommodate each other. For example, Slovakia is the only V4 country which does not recognise the independence of Kosovo while the other countries have done so. V4 countries also have differing views on agriculture policies as well as in ways to handle the economic crisis. But I see this as fair competition.

The place where more internal support from the V4 may be expected is in supporting the candidates of V4 countries for various international posts. I think that this is an area where the potential of the V4 could also be used.

To read the whole interview, please go to www.spectator.sk

Czech Republic

Capital: Prague
Area: 78,864 sq km

Population: 10,211,000 (as of 2004)
Population by ethnic composition: Czech (90.42%), Moravian and Silesian (3.83%), Slovak (1.89%), Polish (0.51%), German (0.38%), Roma (0.11%), Hungarians, Ukrainians, Ruthenians, Russians, Greeks, and others (2.86%)

Currency: Czech koruna
Average wage: CZK 22,328 (€878)
Unemployment rate: 6.3 percent (as of June 2009)

Hungary

Capital: Budapest
Area: 93,036 sq km

Population: 9,981,334 (as of 2006 est.)
Population by ethnic composition: Hungarians 92.3%; Germans, 200-220,000; Slovaks, 100-110,000; Croats, 80-90,000; Romanians, 25,000; Serbs, 5,000; Slovenes, 5,000; Polish, 10,000; Greeks, 3,000; Armenians, 1,500; Bulgarians, 3,000; Ruthenians, 6,000; Ukrainians, 2,000. The Roma population is estimated at 400-600,000.

Currency: Hungarian forint
Average wage: HUF 201,667 (€752)
Unemployment rate: 10.3 percent (as of June 2009)

Poland

Capital: Warsaw
Area: 312,685 sq km

Population: 38,605,000 (as of 2003)
Population by ethnic composition: Poles (circa 97.8%); other ethnic groups (about 1 million people in all): Germans, Ukrainians, Belarussians, Lemkos, Roma, Lithuanians, Slovaks, Russians, Jews, Armenians, Tartars, Czechs and Karaims
Currency: Polish zloty
Average wage: PLN 3,289 (€800.6)
Unemployment rate: 8.2 percent (as of June 2009)

Slovakia

Capital: Bratislava
Area: 49,035 sq km

Population: 5,439,448 (estimated as of 2006)
Population by ethnic composition: Slovak (85.8%), Hungarian (9.7%), Roma (1.7%), Czech (0.8%), Ruthenian, Ukrainian, Russian, German, Polish and others (2%)

Currency: euro (until 2009, Slovak koruna)
Average wage: €710.45
Unemployment rate: 11.7 percent (as of June 2009)

Source: www.visegradgroup.eu and The Slovak Spectator databases



Visegrad Group countries.

Source: Archive

Visegrad Scholarship Programme

Master's and Post-Master's scholarships are awarded to selected scholars for periods of 1 or 2 semesters (with the exception of Master's scholarships within the In-Coming scheme where 1- to 4-semester scholarships can be awarded). Based on the annual budget of €1,884,000, the fund will award approximately 480 semesters in the academic year 2009/2010.

Citizens of the following countries may apply:

Albania (AL), Armenia (AM), Azerbaijan (AZ), Belarus (BY), Bosnia and Herzegovina (BA), Croatia (HR), the Czech Republic (CZ), Georgia (GE), Hungary (HU), Macedonia (MK), Moldova (MD), Montenegro (ME), Poland (PL), the Russian Federation (RU), Serbia (RS), Slovakia (SK) and Ukraine (UA).

The same rules are applicable to Kosovar scholars.

Scholarship schemes

Intra-Visegrad Scholarships

For scholars coming from one of the V4 countries (CZ, HU, PL or SK) who plan to study in any V4 country other than that of their citizenship.

Successful applicants within this scheme will receive scholarships of €2,000/semester and the host university/institute will receive support of €1,500/semester.

Out-Going Scholarships

For outstanding students or Master's degree holders from V4 countries to study at acknowledged universities in AL, AM, AZ, BY, BA, HR, GE, MK, MD, ME, RS and UA.

Successful applicants within this scheme will receive scholarships of €2,500/semester and the host university/institute will receive support of €1,500/semester.

In-Coming Scholarships

For outstanding scholars who wish to study at accredited universities in V4 countries and who are citizens of the following countries: AL, AM, AZ, BY, BA, HR, GE, MK, MD, ME, RU, RS and UA.

Within this scheme, Master's scholarships can be awarded for up to 4 semesters.

Successful applicants within this scheme will receive scholarships of €2,500/semester and the host university/institute will receive support of €1,500/semester.

Scholarship Program for Belarusian Students

For scholars coming to V4 countries from Belarus.

Successful applicants within this scheme will receive scholarships of €2,500/semester and the host university/institute will receive support of €1,500/semester.

Scholarship Program for Ukrainian Students

For scholars coming to V4 countries from Ukraine.

Successful applicants within this scheme will receive scholarships of €2,500/semester and the host university/institute will receive support of €1,500/semester.

Source: www.visegradfund.org

Selected universities in the V4 region

Czech Republic

Charles University in Prague
Masaryk University in Brno
Czech Technical University in Prague
University of West Bohemia in Plzeň
Palacký University in Olomouc
VŠB - Technical University in Ostrava
University of Tomáš Baťa in Zlín

Hungary

Corvinus University of Budapest
Budapest University of Technology and Economics
University of Debrecen
University of West Hungary in Sopron
University of Pécs
University of Szeged
Semmelweis University in Budapest
Central European University in Budapest

Poland

University of Warsaw
Jagiellonian University in Krakow
Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań
University of Wrocław
AGH University of Science and Technology in Krakow
Krakow University of Economics
Catholic University of Lublin
University of Gdańsk

Slovakia

Comenius University in Bratislava
Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava
University of Economy in Bratislava
Trnava University
University of Žilina
Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice
University of Technology in Zvolen

Visegrad Fund helps travelling students

BY MICHAELA STANKOVÁ
Spectator staff

SINCE THE 1990s, learning by travelling, getting to know other cultures and meeting the locals has been a favourite part of the university experience for many students in central and eastern Europe. Today, while most students from the region still prefer to head westwards to 'check out' the better study conditions in western European countries and the US, the Visegrad leaders are encouraging exchanges within the region as well as with its eastern neighbours.

Education is one of the priorities of programmes supported by the International Visegrad Fund (IVF). Generally there are three ways in which the IVF supports education. First, through the standard and small grants programmes, under which individual projects such as the annual Visegrad Summer School (see the accompanying article), are supported. Secondly, the Visegrad Scholarship Programme supports the exchange of scholars and students in the V4 countries. And, finally the latest plan, the Visegrad University Studies Grant (VUSG) supports university courses and programmes which deal with Visegrad-related issues at any university in the world.

The student exchanges are, however, the current centre of attention for the IVF, according to its PR director Jiří Sýkora. With these scholarships, students as well as teachers can learn by travelling and living in another country.

"It's extremely rewarding to us to learn that a student whom

we supported in a master's programme was accepted for doctoral studies in the same country," Sýkora told The Slovak Spectator.

"The main aim of the exchanges is to enable students to learn about the culture and language of another nation," Ildikó Vančová, the deputy dean for international relations of the Faculty of Central European Studies (FSS) in Nitra told The Slovak Spectator. "FSS students frequently travel to Hungary and the Czech Republic, but they don't have much experience with the IVF scholarships yet. In the coming academic year, FSS will welcome the first in-coming student from Ukraine supported by the Visegrad Scholarship," Vančová said.

At the launch of the programme in 2003 its scholarship funds distributed among 80 scholars was almost €250,000, which according to Sýkora represented about one-fifth of the IVF's budget. Today, the scholarships make up one-third of the budget, as almost €1.3 million was allocated to the programme. In the coming academic year the budget for the scholarship programme exceeds €1.5 million, which will enable the fund to grant scholarships for 480 semesters.

Students from 17 countries in central and eastern Europe, the western Balkans and south Caucasus are eligible to apply for a scholarship in one of the three schemes - intra-Visegrad scholarships, out-going scholarships for V4 students wishing to study at a university in one of the neighbouring countries and in-coming scholarships for students from beyond the V4 to come and study at one of the Czech, Slovak, Polish or Hun-

garian universities.

Within the in-coming scholarships scheme the IVF operates special programmes focused on Ukraine and Belarus.

"We are focusing on these countries because they are our closest neighbours to the east," Sýkora said. "Ukraine is a regional superpower, so it's necessary to communicate with it. For our region's stability it's important that Ukraine is stable too. In addition, through Ukraine the countries more to the east in the southern Caucasus are opening up for us."

The aim of the programme is that the students return home after their studies in the V4 countries and use what they have learned to improve the state administration or other areas of public life in their home country.

"For our students, awareness about the V4 is a necessity. As they travel around, they will see the region as a whole and that gives us the hope that one day the borders between the Visegrad countries will be less important than they are now," Sýkora said.

The out-going scholarships haven't created as much interest as the in-coming scholarships, because the range of applicants is limited by their study fields. Only students in regional studies and international relations can apply for these scholarships. According to Sýkora, the applicants sometimes have only limited fluency in the language of their target country. Russian or local languages are often required.

That was the case of Matej Kresáč, a Slovak student of international relations specialising in eastern Europe at Masaryk University in Brno. As an

undergraduate student he spent a semester through the EU Erasmus programme in Warsaw. For graduate studies he was awarded an out-going scholarship to study at the Rivne Institute for Slavonic Studies of the Kyiv Slavonic University. He appreciated the possibility to get some more practice in Russian and Ukrainian languages.

"Most people want to try studying in the West, because everything is better there and you can live without much trouble," he told The Slovak Spectator. "I wanted to get to know Ukraine better and improve my knowledge of Ukrainian and Russian, since eastern Europe is in the focus of my studies."

Travelling eastwards had a slightly exotic touch and Kresáč thought it would be more interesting to study in Ukraine than in western Europe.

Somewhat negatively surprised by the living standards in his host country, he said that his stay in some respects confirmed some of the stereotypes he'd heard about Ukraine. But overall he felt his time there had a positive impact on him.

"It gave me the opportunity to look at countries with a different point of view from the teachers and other people that I met there," Kresáč said.

Kresáč agrees that the V4 countries have a lot to offer to Ukraine in terms of the democratisation and the Euro-Atlantic integration process, but he also believes the learning process goes both ways.

"It's good to get to know our eastern neighbours better," he said. "And for students from beyond V4, coming here will help them to better understand democratic standards."

Spirit marks the Visegrad Summer School

BY MICHAELA STANKOVÁ
Spectator staff

IN THE SEARCH for something that might be called 'the Visegrad spirit' it is often better to leave the world of high politics and business relations and go to places where the spirit lives among people in their everyday work and interests. Krakow becomes one of such places every year at the start of the summer, when the Visegrad Summer School (VSS) opens its doors for another group of students from all around central and eastern Europe (CEE) to gather in a lovely location just outside the city and spend some days in fruitful discussions.

The Visegrad Summer School, organised annually by the Villa Decius Association in Krakow, has had its eighth edition in 2009, and as such perhaps deserves the status of a traditional event.

Every year about 50 students selected mainly from countries of the Visegrad Group and its eastern and southern neighbours gather in the romantic surroundings of the Villa Decius, a mansion located in the centre of one of Krakow's historical parks and spend almost two weeks in the company of recognised academics, political analysts, journalists and other regional experts.

Danuta Glondys, the director of Villa Decius, said she started working for the association with the idea of developing a project that would be open for young people from the Visegrad countries. As soon the International Visegrad Fund was created and allocated funds, Glondys and her colleagues came



Unconventional learning methods at the VSS.
Photo: Courtesy of Villa Decius

up with the idea of the summer school.

"It is Villa Decius's biggest international programme, well known in the V4 and Ukraine, Belarus, Russia and other CEE countries," Glondys told The Slovak Spectator. "Over the years the Visegrad Summer School has become not only a platform for learning, meeting people, promoting cultures but also a school of mutual respect, solidarity and cooperation."

The topics in the programme relate to society, politics, culture and economy, putting focus on the hottest issues on the public discussion. In 2009, for instance, the participants discussed the missile defence system in Poland and the Czech Republic, the introduction of the European single currency in Slovakia and the political crisis in Hungary in 2008.

Through the years, the school activities have evolved. Now apart from lectures and debates, the students also participate in thematic workshops, simulation games and cultural presentations.

"The special character of the VSS is also created by its participants who discuss, get to know each other, resist national stereotypes and try to build cooperation for the future," said Glondys.

After their departure from Krakow the VSS participants usually say they appreciated the networking and socialising opportunities the school gave them, as well as the possibility to look at the world and the Visegrad region from different perspectives.

According to Kasia, a 2009 participant from Poland, the atmosphere of the VSS shows how close the countries in the region really are to each other.

"The most important knowledge I gained was that we Polish, Hungarians, Czechs and Slovaks have common interests in a lot of areas as well as common heritage and common way of thinking," she said.

Perhaps because of this kind of spirit the International Visegrad Fund proudly calls the VSS its flagship programme.

"But it's not all cake and ice cream at the school," Jiří Sýkora, the IVF Public Relations Coordinator, told The Slovak Spectator. "Every year our students engage in lively discussions. Sometimes they disagree. Sometimes they argue. But always it brings meaningful debate."

Rafał Słomka
contributed to this report.

Singing a single V4 melody

BY JANA LIPTÁKOVÁ
Spectator staff

THE VISEGRAD Group countries share large swaths of common history, roots and traditions but at the same time they are diverse enough to provide unique attractions and experiences for tourists from inside as well as outside the Visegrad region. And while economic cooperation within the Visegrad Group might sometimes be rather problematic because of the competitive nature of the Visegrad countries' economies, tourism is the sector in which the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia have together tuned to a single melody.

National tourist boards of Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia have teamed up and created the project called European Quartet, One Melody with the aim to present the V4 countries as a common destination to potential overseas tourists.

"This multilateral cooperation aims to raise awareness of the region in more-distant markets such as the USA, China, Russia and Japan whose tourists are more likely to take a longer roundtrip rather than visit a single country in the Central European region," Márk Kincses from the Hungarian National Tourist Office (HNTO) told The Slovak Spectator. "In these markets we jointly promote the shared values of the region and each country's unique attractions. Within the framework of this cooperation we are producing brochures, organising road shows and workshops, exhibiting at both public events and travel trade fairs and organising familiarisation trips for travel agents and press trips."

The national tourist boards are especially jointly presenting certain product groups such as capital cities and historical sites, spas, Jewish monuments, UNESCO sites and MICE (the meetings, incentives, conventions and exhibitions segment of tourism), according to Lívia Lukáčová from the Slovak Tourist Board (SACR).

Along with traditional outreach tools a project website, www.european-quartet.com, is operated by the Czech national board, CzechTourism. It is available in four languages - English, Japanese, Chinese and Por-



The Gothic castle at Malbork in Poland.

Photo: Courtesy of POT

tuguese. Later in 2009 a Russian version of the website should be launched as, according to Kincses, Russia is a very important market for all of the V4 countries which are spending more money and advertising more intensively in that country.

Health tourism is also becoming an important market segment for the V4 countries.

"We would like to emphasize the importance of health tourism, as a potential new product of V4 cooperation," said Kincses.

The list of activities of the national tourist boards for 2009 include road shows in Russia and China as well as workshops while a road show through four American cities - Los Angeles, San Diego, Seattle and Portland - took place in December 2008.

Last year the V4 countries also produced a movie to present the Central European Region in a multimedia form.

Local tourism

The purpose of the teaming up of the four tourist boards is to promote the Visegrad region in overseas markets even though there is no institutionalised cross-border cooperation for tourism just between the V4 countries. In spite of this V4 member countries perceive each other as important for their domestic tourism industry.

For the Polish Tourist Organisation (POT) the joint promotional undertaking by European Quartet, One Melody is one of the

highest priority projects in terms of international cooperation. But the V4 region is also interesting and very important for domestic tourism as well as for incoming travellers to Poland, said Emilia Kubik, the project manager of the POT strategic planning department.

"The neighbouring countries of Slovakia and the Czech Republic are natural destinations for Polish travellers, especially for winter holidays as a great number are departing annually to the Slovak Tatras for skiing and to the Czech part of Sudetes," Kubik told The Slovak Spectator. "On the other hand both capitals, but especially Prague, are desired city-break destinations for those who prefer cultural tourism."

Slovakia also perceives its neighbouring countries - the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary as the most important countries from the viewpoint of the entry points for tourists.

"Most foreign visitors arrive from these countries, along with Germany, and they spend the longest stays in Slovakia. From this viewpoint the V4 region is of high importance for Slovakia," said Lukáčová of the Slovak Tourist Board.

SACR has representatives in each of these markets who carry out all marketing and promotional activities with regard to products and destinations in which there is the highest interest.

"We can list Prague as an example, where we organised a presentation about Slovak spas in

May," said Lukáčová. "In June we organised Days of Slovak Cuisine in one of the most well-known restaurants in Budapest. And we are just preparing a large presentation about Slovakia for Krakow."

Over a longer term Slovakia reports an increasing number of nights spent by tourists from the Czech Republic and Poland. But the figures for 2009 will be fall under the influence of the global economic crisis and SACR expects there will be a 20-30 percent drop in foreign visitors to Slovakia, according to Lukáčová.

In addition to the economic crisis, Slovakia's foreign tourism has been affected by the adoption of the euro in 2009. While established countries of the EU, for example Germany and Austria, perceive this as improving the image of Slovakia as a developed and progressive country, it has made Slovakia a more expensive destination for visitors from its V4 partners due to the weakening currencies of Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary against the euro. However, Lukáčová believes that the adoption of the common currency will make a significant positive contribution over the long run.

To the contrary, Hungary became favourite shopping destination for Slovaks because of the very favourable exchange rates in the first half of 2009 and tourism increased significantly from the bordering regions, according to Kincses.

Hungary sees its neighbours from V4 as very important as it receives a high number of visitors from Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland and it sees even greater potential.

"In its marketing strategy the Hungarian National Tourist Office laid out as a priority to focus on nearby source markets, thus the V4 countries too," said Kincses. "HNTO has representation offices in Warsaw and Prague and while it had to close some of its other foreign offices due to required cost cutting, it has recently opened its tourism office in Bratislava to express the weight of the importance of Slovak market," said Kincses.

Besides joint activities within the V4 partnership, the Hungarian tourist office has ad-hoc joint marketing activities with the other V4 countries' partner organisations, like the Heart of Europe Roadshow held in the Nordics based on Czech-Polish-Hungarian cooperation, said Kincses.

Tourism in the Visegrad Group region

The Visegrad Group countries make up a compact part of central and northern Europe bordering Ukraine, Russia, Lithuania and Romania on the east, Germany and Austria on the west and Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia on the south. This part of Europe offers a whole array of natural gems ranging from snow-topped mountains to lowlands with verdant fields and clear lakes and even a long coastline along the Baltic Sea. And the region's position as a crossroad between the west and the east has given each country many varied and unique cultural and historical sites.

Poland

Poland is the only V4 member state which has a sea, the Baltic Sea, on its north coast. But in Poland cultural tourism is definitely the most important, especially cities like Krakow, Warsaw and Tricity on the Baltic coast, Emilia Kubik of the Polish Tourist Organisation told The Slovak Spectator.

When speaking about sectors of Polish tourism not yet fully tapped, Kubik's says more attention is required in promoting active tourism and spa and wellness trips to Poland, particularly among Slovaks and Czechs who often spend their holidays in very active ways.

In listing some lesser known, but still unique tourist attractions and destinations, Kubik enumerates several tourist attractions in northern Poland. These are, for example, the Gothic city of Toruń and Malbork Castle. Among natural sites, she mentions the Białowieża National Park, the wetland marshes along the Biebrza River in the Biebrzański National Park, and the Słowiński National Park with its nearby Łeba seaside resort.

Hungary

Hungary is a relatively small country with much to offer visitors. There is diversity in its landscape, ranging from flat and grassy plains to rolling hills and valleys, and its culture has space for both traditional wooden churches and vibrant modern nightclubs, says Márk Kincses from the Hungarian National Tourist Office.

Kincses lists health tourism and several niche products, such as bird watching and religious/pilgrimage tours, as aspects of Hungarian tourism not fully utilised so far.

In recommending some less well-known but still unique tourist attractions and destinations in Hungary, Kincses lists Pécs, which will bear the title of European Capital of Culture in 2010, the Cave Bath at Miskolc-Tapolca, the wetland reserves of Lake Tisza with its many natural treasures which have given it UNESCO World Heritage designation, the picturesque bike trails running between the volcanic hills of the Balaton uplands, and the system of caves under the hills of Budapest.

Slovakia

Slovakia has nearly every kind of attraction for tourists, with the exception of a sea. Its lush nature and many cultural and historical monuments make it a most-desired and frequently-visited destination. The competitive advantage of Slovakia, according to Lívia Lukáčová from the Slovak Tourist Board, is that such an extensive spectrum of tourist opportunities are offered within such a small geographical area.

Lukáčová sees convention, medical and spa tourism as not yet fully utilised and she expects that interest in golf tourism in Slovakia will increase.

For tourists interested in historical sites related to technological development, Slovakia is rich with sites such as the water mills on the Malý Dunaj River, the Mint Museum in Kremnica and the old mines around Banská Štiavnica. Among Slovakia's long list of natural sites and outdoor activities, Lukáčová mentions just a few lesser known attractions such as the unique 'rocky balls' in Kysuce region, the Cave of Dead Bats in the Low Tatras, and rafting down the Orava and Váh rivers. In the winter the mountains of Slovenský Raj offer ice climbing.

Czech Republic

The Czech capital, Prague, is described as one of the most beautiful cities in the world and is probably the most popular destination of foreign tourists in the Czech Republic. But the country has much more to offer. As Czechs are known as people who like spending their free time in very active ways, the Czech Republic offers plenty of opportunities for biking, hiking, and skiing. History lovers can visit castles and chateaus turned into museums, or Jewish monuments, many of which are listed as UNESCO World Heritage sites.

The list of lesser known, but certainly interesting, historical sites includes Mikulčice, an early medieval Great Moravian fortified settlement on the eastern border with Slovakia. Nearby, wine lovers can find a multitude of wine cellars under Pálava hill in the region of Mikulov. And imbibers can continue on to Karlovy Vary, which along with its famous spa is the hometown of the legendary herbal liqueur, Becherovka. The southern parts of the country offer excellent fishing opportunities, fascinating UNESCO sites such as Telč and Český Krumlov as well as the picturesque village of Hološovice, considered as a true pearl of the rustic Baroque style.

V4: New development model wanted

Continued from pg 3

Nevertheless, this may have severe social consequences in the Baltic states and in Hungary, for example, which just cannot be shouldered.

From the perspective of growth and convergence based on both internal (investments, consumption) and external (capital flows, trade) factors it is evident that the new member states which have coped better with the crisis so far are those which have produced high but not overheated growth since accession coupled with an appropriate level of external and internal financial stability, a low budget deficit and a healthy public debt indicator.

Hungary is in the fourth worst position (after the Baltic states) having lost its growth momentum three years ago (when the external environment was much more benign).

Slovakia is in a dubious position as regards growth trends because while its equilibrium is stabilised by the euro, the economy is structurally one-sided which represents a major risk for the coming period. There are already signs that the economic downturn in Slovakia could be such that it nullifies the majority of the economic successes achieved in previous years.

The Czech Republic and Poland are in a relatively healthy position, but a significant and lengthy economic downturn cannot be ruled out, particularly for the Czech Republic, given that it is very open to the external economy and dependent on exports. With its larger domestic market, Poland may well be able to "ride out" the next phase of the crisis with a minor downturn.

On the whole, the previous economic development model of countries in eastern Europe may have ceased to exist. Develop-

ment based on cheap external funding has been replaced by development fuelled by domestic savings, which will thus be better conceived but significantly slower. Economic processes of countries in the region will evolve similarly in the period after the crisis following the significant divergence observed in recent years. Every country will have to adapt to a new economic development model that will focus on gradually redressing the balance and mitigating the social implications of the crisis. External constraints will force countries previously not on a sustainable growth path to implement severe adjustments and corrections, which will primarily involve measures encouraging sustainability.

Tamás Novák is a senior research fellow working with the Institute for World Economics of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences

Helping hands from NGOs

By VLADIMÍR VLADÁR
Special to the Spectator

WHEN the countries of the Visegrad Group (V4) joined the European Union they accepted the obligation to render aid and assistance to developing countries. In addition to the official policies of the EU and individual governments, there are several initiatives which, working in synergy with official efforts, help to make the changes in target countries more lasting and consistent by provision of non-financial assistance.

What makes V4 countries different from traditional donor countries in the sphere of development aid are their experiences of transition in various sectors of society, specifically transformation and reform processes in the areas of politics, the economy, and the rule of law.

Building on this experience, the International Visegrad Fund supports projects that convey the Visegrad Group's experience in the fields of democratisation and integration into various inter-governmental structures, especially the European Union. European integration was in fact one of the driving forces behind the creation of the Visegrad Group itself.

NGOs of the Visegrad region

Non-governmental organisations played a key role in democratisation projects and integration campaigns in the Visegrad countries. In many cases, they complemented the work of governments in many areas while those governments faced a range of different, complex tasks. Through the activities of NGOs, the governments of these countries could "outsource" some of their more demanding and detailed tasks since NGOs are more flexible and emerge directly from civil societies while forming, cultivating and changing those societies. Many of their activities come across as more credible to target groups.

While the original objective of intensive cooperation among the V4 countries has been successfully achieved the experience and knowledge acquired during the transition period are unique and worth sharing. It would be a waste not to use them in countries that are facing the same changes and challenges: the countries of the Balkans and the post-Soviet countries on the eastern borders of the EU.

Nevertheless, these countries differ from the Visegrad members. Certainly, geographical distance has played a vital role in these differences, something which can also be found among the V4 countries. However, their advanced culture and the absence of, or the presence in a milder form, of cultural identity crises enabled the V4 countries to promptly take the path of change. On the contrary, Balkan countries and Belarus have long faced the challenge of having to rediscover their cultural identities.

Resolving questions of cultural identity and accepting and acknowledging these is import-

ant for the whole society. Only after this happens can societies start making changes and reforms that are sustainable and irreversible. A cultural campaign in Belarus, Budzma! (Let us bel!), deserves attention in this respect. With the help of artists and experts, including those from the V4, the authors of the campaign are trying to 'de-Sovietise' society there and search for a common Belarusian identity: from language, through music, to visual art - searching for all that can be called Belarusian without trying to instigate nationalism.



An exchange led by the Pontis Foundation in Serbia. Photo: Pontis

The engagement of V4 NGOs in such projects helps them to understand the problems and needs of these regions and thus enable the selection and design of projects which can have real impact for both regions.

One such example might be 'Visegrad for European Serbia' a project implemented by the Pontis Foundation in cooperation with partners from the Visegrad Group: DemNet of Hungary, the Robert Schuman Foundation of Poland, and the Czech Democracy and Culture Studies Centre, as well as the Serbian partner organisation, the Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence.

The project organisers learned that the regions show the gravest lack of understanding about specific aspects of the European integration process. In Serbia, the debate about the country's European future has taken place mainly in Belgrade, where just a small group of people is involved, primarily politicians and experts. Ordinary Serbs perceive EU membership as something distant, without a specific positive influence on their everyday lives in local communities.

Thus, the project has brought the issue of integration to the regions and addresses issues which really concern citizens - especially those concerned with social and economic development, cross-country regional cooperation, or prospects for students in the EU. Panels including experts from the V4 countries considerably improved citizens' understanding of the European integration process, its role in the development of their local communities, and the essential relationships between improvements in their everyday lives and the strategic course of the country. This was especially true in

parts of the country and among groups of the population who have been critically affected by the negative effects of economic transition.

Analysts and vehicles of change

The needs of post-Soviet countries, due to their actual social-political situation, are different. The need to motivate and support public dialogue and strengthen the creation of public policies remains a clear and unambiguous need. Thus, the focus of help of NGOs from the Visegrad region

remains to help develop think tanks and communities of analysts while supporting their training and skills development in order to convey recommendations to the public.

Post-Soviet countries are in fact more open to ideas and good practice with the potential to shape the process of preparing for and implementing significant decisions if these come from the Visegrad countries rather than, for example, from the United States or western European states. This is why Slovak think tanks are very active in support for analytical communities: Slovakia's Institute for Public Affairs (through its project on NATO in Ukraine), MESA10, the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, and the Bathory Foundation from Poland are especially active in projects in Belarus.

Knowledge

Apart from the issue of integration, there are many spheres which enable transfer of specific know-how from Visegrad countries to the countries of the Balkans and former Soviet Union.

Developing democratic institutions, a legal state and civic society is only one of these spheres. NGOs from the V4 countries can support local NGOs, mobilise local communities, inspire regional development, advocate for human rights, volunteer programmes, and programmes of good governance for public administration, and local government.

The social sphere also opens avenues for know-how transfer. Experience of transforming health-care systems and social reforms are timeless themes even in stable and developed economies, but their shared experience of centrally planned economies, means that Visegrad countries can provide more useful inspira-

tion to Balkan and post-Soviet countries.

The experience of transformation from a centrally planned economy to a market economy makes the V4 know-how a useful tool to help with the privatisation of state companies, the reform of public finances, business policies, the shaping a good business environment and with supporting small and medium-sized enterprises. Moreover, in recent months they have been able to enhance responses to the global financial crisis.

Resources and other challenges

For many NGOs these projects are a suitable area for their activities since many of them have fulfilled their goals in their home countries. By focusing on these countries they can in fact help to secure their own continued existence.

However, Slovakia, as well as other V4 countries, has limited financial resources and human capacities so the issue of securing resources remains one of the most important challenges which these organisations face. The most apt solution is to build coalitions and programmes that involve several countries.

One possibility for financing democratisation programmes is funding from governments that have undertaken to provide development aid, including support for democratisation. Official development aid in Slovakia has been implemented through the programme SlovakAid, from which Slovak NGOs can apply for resources to finance the projects.

All the V4 countries have such programmes and in many cases they target the same countries, so the coordination of programmes and projects can be useful. NGO forums have been created - for example, the Slovak NGO Platform brings together organisations whose activities go beyond the Balkans and the post-Soviet countries; the Slovak organisation Erko, which develops projects in Africa; or the Slovak NGO People in Peril, with which the Pontis Foundation coordinates activities for Cuba in close cooperation with the Czech organisation People in Need.

A specific example of cooperation is also the Workshop of Visegrad Four Donor Coordination for Serbia, which the Pontis Foundation in Bratislava is preparing for September 2009. Representatives of organisations, ministries, and governmental agencies from the whole V4 region will take part in this, along with contributions from other countries that are active in the Balkans through projects or as donors. Another source where good projects can get help is the European Commission, which has several programmes that can finance or co-finance democratisation and experience-sharing projects.

Cuts in the financial funds available and the departure of traditional foreign donors from the region have forced non-governmental organisations to seek different ways of financing, especially in the form of philanthropy from the private sector.

Vladimír Vladár works for the Pontis Foundation

PV: Fund evolves

Continued from pg 2

On the contrary, the more diverse our cultures are, the richer the region is. Then of course we have to seek the connecting points which have developed through more than the 1000-year history of this region where we have met sometimes as friends and sometimes as enemies. It would be worthy of a separate study, which the International Visegrad Fund could support, to look at how we perceive each other and how the historical experience has formed each nation's perception of the others. Perhaps a textbook on the history of central Europe would be useful and the fund could support it.

TSS: There has been a perception that programmes of the International Visegrad Fund focus mainly on the areas of education and culture.

PV: Yes, in early stages there was a trend that the fund supported mostly education and culture projects and there originated perhaps an impression that we supported everything that our culture ministries were not able to support but our spectrum was, and is, wider. Applicants from the field of education and culture still prevail but the number of scientific projects is growing. We would like to support more scientific projects. Of course, we would have a problem due to our financial capacity to directly support scientific research, especially in natural sciences or medicine but we can finance conferences and forums that might inspire new ideas or build teams in the scientific area.

TSS: One of the most urgent issues that almost all V4 countries share is the poverty and poor conditions in Roma communities. How can the International Visegrad Fund contribute to finding solutions?

PV: A Roma agenda was involved among strategic projects for coming years and we hope to reach some concrete results. We do not want to end up producing additional conferences which will only describe the problem. The problem has already been described very well and we need to progress to some real action. We are pondering the possibility of bringing together leaders of towns and villages and creating a platform for intensive mutual exchange of ideas and experiences. The participants should be able to report 'we are treating the issue this way and it works' or 'we have tried this way and it failed'. We are open to other projects as well while supporting education projects for the Roma.

We also might try out the option of bringing some ideas and possible projects to the table and offering them to people. Yet, Roma projects have their urgency and we want to make sure that they truly follow the objective of integrating Roma into society.

TSS: Is there enough awareness about the activities of

the fund?

PV: The awareness about IVF is growing and not only inside V4 countries but outside them too. IVF is helping in this process by various actions like presentations at various forums. However, I think that the best promotion for IVF is each successful project or interesting scholarship.

TSS: Do you have some personal priorities in managing the fund?

PV: I came to a very well-functioning organisation. When I submitted my concept proposal to the competition at our ministry I clearly stressed that I would not make artificial changes just to prove that I am changing something. Perhaps we will now put more stress on strategic projects and somehow tune them more to the needs of the V4 countries. The fund should also help politicians of the region to look at several options for solving problems in different areas, such as environmental issues and energy security.

The support for environmental activities is, as well, among one of our priorities and our strategic project is now called Green Visegrad. It comes as a logical outcome of current developments. Environmental projects have always had their support since the countries are in the same space and indeed are trying to solve very similar problems.

The same goes for energy security. Of course, we do not have the money to build a pipeline or a power plant from our resources, but what we can do is to offer experts within our projects, which IVF supports as a discussion forum, to think about what could be done with the problem. It is an urgent issue and V4 countries certainly have experts who have generated knowledge in these areas.

It will be important for the fund to be also able to flexibly react to the emerging needs of the V4 countries. We can create new programmes or support new grants and in this way give an opportunity to solve emerging problems. In short IVF must be a living organism.

We also are considering more clearly separating small grants from standard grants. Today, small grants are given up to €5,000 and standard grants are over €5,000 and these grants might need a greater degree of separation.

We put a lot of stress on transparency and accuracy. Sometimes IVF is criticised for being too pedantic with the funds. I can say only one thing: we have strict rules and these must be kept. Four governments trust us with not insignificant financial resources and we do not have the right to fail. In addition, I do not think that the conditions that must be fulfilled to get a grant are too complicated. Nevertheless, we will continue in our effort to make the conditions clearer and the application process simpler if it is possible to do so. Visegrad's programs should be open for all who have interesting ideas and who want to cooperate with people from other countries.

MAIN: Roma strategy among priorities

Continued from pg 1

ES: The V4 is an active player in the region and sees itself as a natural partner for neighbouring regions undergoing serious internal transformation processes which differ from one country to another. The V4 countries wish to share their experiences both with western Balkan states – mainly Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as with countries of the Eastern Partnership. The International Visegrad Fund is the sole institution of the V4 and is responsible for carrying out special V4 projects in neighbouring regions in the fields of modern education (scholarships and training for teachers), promotion of V4 culture (publishing of V4 literature) and support to local administrations according to their specific needs. The V4 will maintain its support for political integration and negotiations of relevant association agreements between the EU on one side and Ukraine, and Moldova as well, on the other. V4 states are sharing their experiences of accession to NATO with Ukraine, we coordinate the input of V4 states to the allied debate on granting of the MAP (Membership Action Plan), and we provide professional support for the development of strategic defence policies.

PS: Yes, the countries of V4 are ready and willing to pass on our experiences from the successful integration process into the EU and NATO. The V4 countries are aware of their responsibility and solidarity with the countries of south-eastern and eastern Europe that have started the process of getting closer to the EU and NATO. We support activities and projects that help to develop democracy and build civil society and thus we are helping these countries in their efforts to make political and economic reforms. In this regard there are two lines of intensive dialogue – with the countries of the western Balkans and with the countries of the Eastern Partnership. From within the V4, sharing Slovakia's experience from the NATO integration process is the more valuable, as Slovakia has been – thanks to close communication and cooperation with the other V4 countries – the Contact Embassy of NATO in Ukraine for a second term already. There are many other ways in which the V4 countries can help the candidate countries. The transfer of experience happens on both the political and the expert level.

TSS: Despite the fact that V4 countries are culturally very close, history not only unites them, but also sometimes divides them – an example is the current tension in relations between Hungary and Slovakia. How can Visegrad cooperation help to solve these problems?

GI: It is absolutely true: the Visegrad countries are bound by historical and cultural heritage. Yet, it also is true that we are competitors in some of the areas. But it is quite important for us to see that alone none of our countries make up such a critical force that it alone would eliminate the risks affecting the region and would create a qualitatively-new situation for further development. Now when we all are seeking ways out from the global economic crisis at political, institutional and economic levels, the key question remains whether our region is able to represent a common value system. Or perhaps the question also could be: what form do we wish central Europe to have in 10-15 years? No one else will do this work for us inhabitants of the Visegrad region. If we admit that, then we can assess the weight of responsibility and where to focus our energy. Yet, this will not solve the disputes existing within the region, for example in Slovak-Hungarian relations. But what it does is help us understand how senseless is the view which wants to see one nation as the enemy of the other and which assumes that we can solve our problematic affairs only by 'conquering' the other or by exchanging messages.

PS: The Visegrad Group is not meant to solve bilateral issues among its member countries. Therefore it is in the interest of all the V4 countries to not burden our constructive and fruitful Visegrad cooperation with the potential divisiveness of open bilateral issues. Maintaining fluent and undisturbed cooperation among the V4 countries is our common interest. Slovakia does not want negative historical reminiscences to burden the development of contemporary Slovak-Hungarian relations. A mixed commission of Slovak and Hungarian historians is therefore preparing a publication about our common history, which should fulfil an important task to go through and sum up the problems and differences between the viewpoints of the Slovak and Hungarian histori-

ography on past events in central Europe, which should help further work, discussion and cooperation between the neighbouring historiographies.

TSS: In the past the approaches of V4 countries (except Poland, perhaps) in finding solutions to problems shared by Roma have been criticised. What is the role of the V4 in solving Roma problems?

GI: The problems of the Roma community living in Europe, most of them in deep poverty at the margins of societies, enduring segregated housing and schooling conditions, must be approached through measures coordinated at the regional and European level. The cooperation then should be strengthened in harmony with this intention. The Hungarian presidency's focus is a joint proposal for the social integration of the Roma community and improvement of their access to European Union resources while these efforts should pursue the application of the principle of equality of chances in access to the support. The prime ministers at their Krakow meeting have already decided about the creation of a working group for the elaboration of the proposal.

PS: Slovakia regards the issues connected with the position of Roma citizens to be an all-European problem and sees its solution in this context. It is necessary to say that perceptions of Roma problems have changed after the EU enlargements in 2004 and 2007 when Roma became the largest European minority. Slovakia is aware that the main responsibility for social exclusion of Roma rests on the shoulders of individual EU member states, but sees the V4 platform as a proper forum for formulating concrete suggestions for the coordination of active approaches to solving the problems of Roma. These suggestions could then help a positive shift in dealing with problems of Roma on the European level. During the ongoing Hungarian presidency, the V4 wants to launch a discussion which would lead to creating a central European Roma Strategy. Its aim should be the improvement of the position of Roma in society also by using resources of the International Visegrad Fund.

MĚ: The so-called Roma strategy belongs to the priorities of the Hungarian presidency of the V4. Its importance was stressed by the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the meeting of foreign ministers in Warsaw in May 2009. The common interest in establishing a working group to deal with Roma issues was then confirmed by the summit of the prime ministers in Krakow in June 2009. The Czech Republic will be represented in the working group by the deputy minister for human rights and minorities.

TSS: Currently, the issue of climate change and environmental protection has become one of the biggest global problems. In the beginning of July, V4 environment ministers met in Krakow. What was the result of the meeting? Has any agreement been reached on a joint approach by the countries?

GI: Environment ministers of the V4 countries stood up for an ambitious, new and all-embracing global agreement at the December Climate Conference in Copenhagen. While acknowledging the necessity of obligations on emissions reductions, V4 countries maintain that efforts of the developed countries must reflect the financial strength of particular countries as well as their responsibility flowing from their share in pollution. Regarding cross-border waste management, the department heads agreed that though the volume of the illegal waste transports has not increased since the countries have joined Schengen, not much progress has been noticed in returning waste illegally transported to V4 countries back to the countries of the waste's origin. In order to solve the problem, the V4 countries will turn with a joint proposal to the European Commission. Meeting the air quality directive presents considerable challenge for all the Visegrad countries, thus the V4 welcomes the extension of the deadline for application of the directive.

PS: The V4 ministers have also stressed the need to realise the mitigation measures needed to achieve the long-term 2 degrees Celsius temperature increase restriction and recognised the criterion of comparability of the reduction attempts for all the advanced countries based on the principles of ability to pay and the duty of the polluter to pay.

To read a longer version of this interview please visit www.spectator.sk

Pursuing V4 goals allegro

BY DOMINIKA UHRÍKOVÁ
Spectator staff

MAKING long distance relationships work can be a difficult task. Now imagine there are four participants instead of just two and each hails from a different country. The Visegrad Cello Quartet, a Slovak-Czech-Polish-Hungarian ensemble of cellists has shown that such a relationship can work. The quartet regularly sells out wherever they perform at concert halls around central Europe.

All they needed to get started was love, enthusiasm and perhaps a good matchmaker, for behind the Visegrad Cello Quartet lies an éminence grise par excellence: diplomat Lubica Krénová, Slovakia's ex-cultural attaché and director of the Slovak Institute in Prague. Krénová came up with the idea of putting the four musicians together in 2005.

"At the beginning, it was only a sort of brainwave, a thought without clear intention," said Krénová, whose primary occupations are in drama criticism and journalism. By discovering the world of classical music, the author of several important monographs on the theatre, wanted to "expand her own limits".

As a diplomatic representative, she had met two men who are among the most renowned musicians of both the local and the international contemporary music scene, Slovak cellist Jozef Lupták and his Czech colleague Jiří Bárta.

"At first I was afraid to reveal my vision to them, which by that time had become clearer and included a conception of the ensemble's first appearance," Krénová told The Slovak Spectator. "I was afraid they would consider me naive."

But when she unfolded the plan, both were pleased and the preparations for the Visegrad Cello Quartet's premiere began.

"I will always keep a wonderful memory of the first Prague concert," said the ex-attachée.



The Visegrad Cello Quartet rehearsing. Photo: Courtesy of J. Lupták

She added that it was not only because she had seen her wish come true, but also for a more personal reason: the premiere was held on the anniversary of her mother's death. Krénová dedicated the project to her mother. "The music, St. George's Basilica at Prague Castle, and the memory of my mom – it was simply overwhelming," she said.

Since then, the quartet has performed at various festivals and prominent cultural events such as the Convergences chamber music festival in Bratislava and Les Invalides in Paris, invariably with great success both artistically and at the box office.

Krénová says the ensemble owes its success to no one but themselves. "Each of them," she says, "is a first-class virtuoso."

At the beginning, the quartet was to be an all-male team. The Polish cellist, however, had to leave the group because of health problems. He was replaced by a young woman, Aleksandra Ohar. Hungarian Tamás Mérei is the other member. From time to time Tamás Varga, another talented cellist, fills in for Mérei.

Since the beginnings, the quartet has stuck with its original goal to familiarise local audiences with contemporary classical music in V4 countries.

Several renowned composers have written scores especially for the ensemble, among them, Slovak musician and composer Marián Varga, former member of the Collegium Musicum Orches-

tra. His Hymn for 4 Celli premiered at the opening ceremony of the Central European University in Skalica.

Lupták, an alumnus of the London Royal Academy of Music and founder and director of the aforementioned Convergences festival, told The Slovak Spectator that the Visegrad Cello Quartet experience is enriching not just for its fans, but also for the musicians themselves.

"Our meetings are always extremely inspiring," he said. "Because we all live in different countries and face different realities, our music enables us to confront our experience and enlarge our horizons. Besides that, as we play we listen to one another playing. Every time, we discover a fresh, new piece of music."

For each concert, in fact, all cellists are expected to bring scores unknown to the others. These are then performed solo, in addition to one composition played by the whole ensemble.

Lupták said that in spite of the time demands given the artists' busy schedules, the rehearsals offer them a priceless human experience, enhanced by the character of the instrument.

"Among all string instruments, cello is by its diapason closest to the human voice," Lupták explained. "This quality gives it really a human dimension. This is one of the reasons why I chose the cello years ago and why it has become my preferred form of expression."

Czech book of V4 drama is ready

THE CZECH volume of the V4 drama series "Visegrad Drama" is just about set to be released in Prague.

Diana Selecká of the Theatre Institute in Bratislava gave The Slovak Spectator some background. "In 2001, the representatives of four Slovak, Czech, Polish and Hungarian theatre institutes agreed to prepare four books featuring thematically and chronologically related plays, dating from the turn of the 19th century to present times."

By the time the project is completed, English translations of sixteen modern pieces accompanied by essays, criticism and photographs will have appeared. The themes of the volumes were decided at the initial meeting. The first, published in 2002 by the Slovak team, was subtitled "Weddings" and included Snowdrifts by Vladimír Hruban Vladimírov, Maryša by Alois and Vilém Mrštík, The Wedding by Stanislav Wyspiański and Ferenc Molnár's The Glass Slipper.

The motif of the second volume was "Escape". It appeared in Hungary in 2004 and featured Július Barč-Ivan's Two, Matthew the Honest by Arnošt Dvořák and Ladislav Klíma, Jerzy Szaniawski's The Seafarer and Áron Tamási's Songbird.

Under the master plan, each volume will contain plays by authors from all V4 countries. "It is important to select plays that best represent both the topic and the period when they were written," Selecká told The Slovak Spectator.

The current volume, prepared by the Czech team will focus on the 1960s. It will contain the following plays: Sunspots by Leopold Lahola, The End of the Shrovetide by Josef Topol, Sławomir Mrożek's Tango and István Örkény's Welcoming the Major.

"In 'The Sixties', the topic coincides with the period," said Kamila Černá from the Theatre Institute in Prague. "This decade was crucial to the development of modern European drama. Those years of comparative freedom gave the local theatre scene, especially in Czechoslovakia, unprecedented vigour. After the 1968 Soviet invasion, the 1960s were looked back on as an era of new hope and a massive artistic upswing. Even today Central European playwrights continue to draw inspiration from that period."

The Polish volume, the last in the series, will focus on contemporary drama.

Černá believes that the most important outcome of the project, which is co-funded by the International Visegrad Fund, will be its long-term contribution to the promotion of the Central European drama on an international scale.

Diana Selecká, her Slovak colleague, agreed.

"Presentation of a nation's literary tradition abroad is a way of cultivating mutual respect," she said. "And, of course, strengthening the links among other nations will hopefully prepare the ground for further co-operation."

By Dominika Uhríková