Sharing real experience

“We are not trying to paint the V4 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,” Péter Vágner, the executive director of the International Visegrad Fund, said in an interview with The Slovak Spectator.

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.

The importance of V4

The Slovak Spectator spoke with Tomáš Strážky, 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.

Student exchanges

While most students from the region still prefer to head westwards to ‘check out’ the better studying 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.

Touring the region

The tour bus of four countries have teamed up to promote the entire Visegrad region to distant overseas tourists. Even though institutional 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.

NGO 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.

V4 in allegro

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

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 Íkády, 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 Repka, spokesperson for the Slovak Foreign Affairs Ministry and Milán Repka, spokesperson for the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs have been seeing answers to questions like these while preparing their views in interviews with The Slovak Spectator.

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

Milán Repka (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 Belarus. As for the departmental cooperation, the leading issues are minorities, energy security and the financial crisis.

Gábor Íkády (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 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 predominantly important 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 enterprizes 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 may be considered as role models among small and medium-sized European states which started the integration process and entered the EU. What can V4 offer to these states?

GI: The V4 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.

History of V4

On February 15, 1991 the President of the Czechoslovak Republic, Vaclav Havel, the President of the Republic of Poland, Lech Walesa, and the Prime Minister of the Republic of Hungary, Jozsef 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 1388, 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.
Sharing what Visegrad countries have learned

By Beata Balogová

Speculator 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 familiar with 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 would 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 example, we are working with a €6 million budget and the fund has grown into an institution supporting regional 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 the surrounding 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, until 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 of the Balkan countries, programmes for students from eastern Europe, especially Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Belarus, but also for south Caucasus countries and the countries of the Balkans.

TSS: Is there enough interest in these scholarships? Do they respond 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 specialisations 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 each school receives €1,500 per student each semester. We provide a scholarship of €2,500 per one semester, which seems to me quite generous compared to the V4 (€500 per month) or 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 which 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 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 there, 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 experience 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 our 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 mutual and respectful dialogue among the members and strengthening communication across Europe.

TSS: The fund has contributed to a 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 aims to bring national cultures closer but I do not think this should ultimately lead to the creation of some kind of ‘Visegrad culture’.

See PV pg 7

The environment is among the priorities of V4 cooperation.

Photo: Courtesy of Villa Decius Association

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 (€4 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 residences. 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: €312,000
Deadline: First day of March June, September and December

Standard Grants
- the amount of activities is identical to that of the Small Grant programme
- 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: €380,000
Deadline: 15th 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: €80,000
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 enrolment in a given curriculum
Annual budget: €100,000
Next deadline: November 10

Source: www.visegradfund.org
The V4 countries represent 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 over 20 years of systemic changes.

Energy security is the most oft-mentioned challenge now facing the V4 Group. (V4) is certainly an important challenge for the EU and hand- ling the impacts of the global eco- nomic crisis. When looking more closely at economic aspects, ex- perts cite the need to keep the V4 region commercially secure and achieve 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 developmental development of the region,” Alexander Dulba, the director of the Research Centre of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (SFPA), told The Slovak Spectator. “There is therefore a regional interest in infrastructure of 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 existence of regional cooperation within the V4.”

Energy security is a hot V4 topic. Photo: Jana Liptáková.

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 being a part of the European Union has been limited or non-existent,” he told The Slovak Spectator. “The consequences of 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 V4 countries could certainly find issues of strategic and regional importance, such as environmental problems.”

Szczerbicki sees the benefits of V4 membership within the EU in the context of cooperation with regard to the EU budget – mostly via structural Funds’ interventions but also via the Common Agricultural Policy.

“The advantage is that it is very important to form a cohesion-friendly federalist-oriented V4 group in the context of World Economic Forum’s Global Competitiveness Index,” he said. “These negotiations in their early stages may begin during the coming months. It is almost a certainty that such an opportunity 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.

The Czech Republic enjoys a comparatively healthy economic situation, whereas Slovakia faces a comparatively challenging economic situation, mainly due to the global economic crisis. While the Czech Republic is relatively stable macroeconomically, Slovakia may even be questionable just as a macroeconomic condition as well as cultural relations with neighbouring cross-border regions. The V4 regularly cooperates with other countries in central Europe – with Austria and Slovenia.

“The V4 closely cooperates with the V4’s eastern neighbours as part of the so-called Eastern Partnership, and the V4 closely cooperates also with various regional groups of coun- tries, including the Benelux countries, the countries of the Nordic Council of Ministers and countries of the western Balkans, he said.

Dulba, 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 Dulba. “The V4 region represents a natural entity from the viewpoint of history and cultural similarity, and these member states, Hungary’s per capita GDP figure stagnated between 2000 and 2008 at a time when the other members of the V4 converted by more than 8 per cent. But even with the new, more structured – some firms have already been launched. But in a continuation of the adjustment from them all. This means either improving the competitiveness or turning it towards a more gainful investment of their economy. The advantage of such an adjustment would be the stagnation in growth in comparison to what was previously expected. Slovakia’s opportunities are very much limited in the current situation by the country’s vulnerability to developments in the European Union.”

The automotive 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 fund- ing flows, and the management of the crisis has not taken the form of bank bailout measures. Only international loans linked to economic conditions but in a continuation of the structural funds and credits that had already been launched. However, this only partly ex- plains the situation in the more post-communist countries of central and eastern Europe.

To read the whole article, please go to www.spectator.sk
The importance of V4

The V4 countries are Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. They are known as the Visegrad Group and have been cooperating since 1991 to enhance regional cooperation and to raise regional themes created within V4 to the EU level. 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 for economic development of the region?

TS: With regards to cross-border cooperation, this is a fundamental theme within V4, but the dimension 1 would like to stress is cross-border cooperation within the V4 and outside, especially with the EU and, 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 the EU itself. I think that the format which serves for better communication with countries outside 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. Hence this cooperation is important for the very beginning has been institutionalised only to a small degree, and this is an area where the potential is present also because of the enlargement of the border regions. There is also an opportunity for better utilisation of mechanisms also because of the V4 cooperation.

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 (EP), 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 a trend to create new regional thematic working groups...
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 the Visegrad region (Czech, Slovak, Polish or Hungarian). The three-weeklong programme, 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.

Damian Gładysz, the director of Villa Decius, is responsible 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, Gładysz and her colleagues came 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,” Gładysz 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 focus of the programme relate to politics, culture and economics. 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 Ukraine in 2008.

Throughout the years, the schools activities have evolved. Now apart from lectures and debates, the students also participate in thematic workshops, simulation games and cultural entertainments.

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 Gładysz.

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 its 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,” Jiráň Šíkora, the IVF Public Relations Coordinator, told The Slovak Spectator. “Every year our students engage in this or that debate. Sometimes they agree, sometimes they disagree. Sometimes they argue. But always it brings meaningful debate.”

Rafal Słomka contributed to this report.

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
VSB - Technical University in Ostrava
University of Tomáš Bata in Zlín

Hungary
Corvinus University of Budapest
Budapest University of Technology and Economics
University of Debaton
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 Wrocaw
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 Economics in Bratislava
Trnava University
University of Žilina
Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice
University of Technology in Zvolen

Visegrad Scholarship Programme

Master's and Post-Master's scholarships are awarded to selected students for periods of 1 or 2 semesters (with the exception of Master's scholarships within the In-Coming scheme where 1-2 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.

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

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

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

Scholarship schemes

Intra-Visegrad Scholarships
For outstanding students or Master's degree holders from V4 countries who are citizens of the following countries: AL, AM, AZ, BY, BA, HR, GE, MK, MD, ME, RS, RU 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.

Scholarship Program for Ukrainian Students
For students 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 €2,500/semester and the host university/institute will receive support of €1,500/semester.

Scholarship Program for Belarusian Students
For students 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 students 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
Singing a single V4 melody

BY JANA LIPTÁKOVÁ
Spectator staff

The V4 countries have some common geographical features which give them all excellent fishing opportunities, fascinating UNESCO sites as well as slavic monasteries, many of which are listed as UNESCO World Heritage sites. Tourists can visit castles and chateaux turned into museums, or Jewish uncles can find a multitude of wine cellars under Pálava hill in the southeastern Moravia.

Slovakia

Slovakia has nearly every kind of attraction for tourists, with the exception of the sea. Its lush nature and many cultural and historical monuments make it a most-desired and frequently visited destination. The competitive advantage that focus on tourism from Slovakia, according to Libia Lukáčová from the Slovak Tourism Office, is bird watching and religious/pilgrimage tours, as aspects of Slovakian tourism not fully utilized so far.

In addition to the economic crisis, Slovakia's tourism has been affected by the adoption of the euro in 2009. While established countries like Germany and Austria, perceived this as improving the image of Slovakia as a developed and progressive country, it has made Slovak tourism more expensive for visitors from its four partners due to the weakening currencies of Poland, the Czech Republic and the Hungarian tourists. However, Lukáčová believes that the adoption of the common currency will make significant progress in the tourism sector.

Hungary

Hungary is a relatively small country with much to offer visitors. Its mountainous terrain ranges from the volcanic hills of the Balaton uplands, to the grassy plains of rolling hills and valleys, and its culture has space for both traditional wooden churches and vibrant modern nightclubs, says Mark Kincses from the Hungarian National Tourist Office.

Kincses lists health tourism and several niche products, such as water and religious pilgrimage tours, as aspects of Hungarian tourism not fully utilized so far. In recommending less well-known but still unique tourist attractions in Hungary, Kincses lists Pécs, which will bear the title of European Capital of Culture in 2010, the Cave Bath at Miskolc-Tapolda, the water reserves of Lake Balaton, the Big Shoes, and areas, which have given it the 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.

Tourism in the V4 Group region

The V4 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 wide 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. 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 more popular than other activities. The competitive advantage that focus on tourism from Poland, according to the Baltic coast, Emilia Kubik of the Polish Tourist Organisation told The Spectator.

In addition to the economic crisis, Poland's tourism has been affected by the adoption of the euro in 2009. While established countries like Germany and Austria perceive this as improving the image of Poland as a developed and progressive country, it has made Polish tourism more expensive for its four partners due to the weakening currencies of Poland, the Czech Republic and the Hungarian tourists. However, Kubik believes that the adoption of the common currency will make significant progress in the tourism sector.

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 Slowinski National Park with its nearby Leba seaside resort.

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 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 will find many castle, chateau and diverse, suitable 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 Mikulcice, 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 southeastern Moravia.

Compiled by the Spectator staff
WHEN the countries of the Visegrad Group (V4) joined the European Union they accepted the task to adjust their governmental structures, especially in the fields of democratisation and the rule of law. The creation of the Visegrad governmental structures, especially in the European Union, was in fact one of the driving forces behind the creation of the Visegrad Group itself.

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 where those governments faced a range of different, complex tasks. Through the activities of NGOs, the governments of these countries could "outsourc" these functions and make their work more meaningful and efficient. While many of these organisations are still struggling, the V4 regions show the potential of this approach.

Nevertheless, NGOs have been successful in achieving the experience and knowledge acquired during the transition period and are well prepared to face the same changes and challenges: the countries of the Balkans and the post-Soviet countries on the eastern borders of the EU.

The engagement of V4 NGOs in such projects helps to support 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 the "Visegrad for European Society" project implemented by the Pontis Foundation in cooperation with partners from the Visegrad Group: DemNet of Hungary, the Robert Schuman Foundation of the United States, and the Czech and Slovak partner organisations. The Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence. The project organisers learned that the regions show the greatest 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.

The project has brought together NGOs from the region and addressed issues which really concern citizens - especially the concerned improvement of the civil and economic development, cross-country regional cooperation and the development of local communities, which can support local NGOs, mobilise local communities, improve regional development and promote human rights, volunteer programmes, and programmes of good governance for public administration and local government.

The exchange led by the Pontis Foundation in Serbia.

The experience of transformation health-care systems and social programmes could "outsource" some of their issues to the new regions, 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.

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. Development programmes can be used as tools for transfer of specific know-how from Visegrad countries to the Balkans and former Soviet Union. Development programmes can be used as tools for transfer of specific know-how from Visegrad countries to the Balkans and former Soviet Union.

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The transfer of experience happens on both the term already. There are many other ways in which activities and projects that help to develop democratic institutions and cooperation with the EU and NATO. We support getting closer to the EU and NATO. We support the Viewpoint of the Slovak and Hungarian historical relations. A mixed commission of Slovak and Hungarian historians is preparing a publication about our common history, which should fulfill an important task to go through and sum up the problems and differences between the viewpoints of the Slovak and Hungarian historians on past events in central Europe, which should help further work, discussion and cooperation between the neighbouring historiographies.

The past the approaches of V4 countries towards Poland, perhaps towards Poland to problems shared by Roma have been criticised. What is the role of the V4 in solving such problems?

GET: The problems of the Roma community living in Europe, most of them in deep poverty at the margins of society, are of great concern and getting closer to the EU and NATO. The V4 countries are aware of their responsibility and solidarity with the countries of south-eastern and eastern Europe. We support the process of getting closer to the EU and NATO. We support activities and projects that help to develop democracy. We build a dialogue and understanding that we are helping these countries in their efforts to make political and economic reforms. In this regard there are two dimensions of interest for us. The first dimension is the countries of the western Balkans and with the countries of the Eastern Partnership. From within the V4, the Slovak system and experience from the NATO and EU integration process is the more valuable, as Slovak has been – thanks to communication and cooperation – closer to the Contact Embassy of NATO in Ukraine for a second term already. There are many other ways in which we can support our partners in the EU enlargement. The transfer of experience happens on both the political and the expert level.

Despite the fact that V4 countries are culturally very close, there are also differences between them, but also sometimes divides them - an example is the current tension in relations between Hungary and Slovakia. How can the V4 cooperation help to solve these problems?

PS: 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 occur in the neighbourhood. The V4 countries wish to share their experiences both with western Balkan states - mainly Serbia and Romania - and with countries of the Eastern Partnership. The International Visegrad Fund is the sole institution of the V4 and is responsible for supporting projects in neighbouring regions in the fields of modern education (scholarships and training for teachers), promotion of V4 culture and society (such as V4 literature) and support to local administrations according to their specific needs. The V4 will maintain a dialogue and support the implementation of relevant association agreements between the EU on one side and Ukraine, and Moldova as well. On V4 level there is a wish to share their experiences of accession to NATO with Ukraine, we coordinate the input of V4 states to the debated alliance of the MPA (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. We are aware of the process of getting closer to the EU and NATO. We support activities and projects that help to develop democracy. We build a dialogue and understanding that we are helping these countries in their efforts to make political and economic reforms. In this regard there are two dimensions of interest for us. The first dimension is the countries of the western Balkans and with the countries of the Eastern Partnership. From within the V4, the Slovak system and experience from the NATO and EU integration process is the more valuable, as Slovak has been – thanks to communication and cooperation – closer to the Contact Embassy of NATO in Ukraine for a second term already. There are many other ways in which we can support our partners in the EU enlargement. The transfer of experience happens on both the political and the expert level.

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 countries: Czech, Polish, Slovak and Hungarian theatre institutes agreed to prepare four books of contemporary drama. We heard the call for manuscripts and submitted completed pieces, waiting for the decision whether to solve the problem, the four countries will turn with a joint proposal to the European Commission.”

The Slovak volume, which is the biggest volume in the series, is a series of sixty modern pieces accompanied by essays,critiques and photographic documentation. The themes of the volumes were decided at the initial meeting of the four representatives of the four V4 countries in 1998. To solve the problem, the V4 countries will turn with a joint proposal to the European Commission.

The current volume, prepared by the Czech team will focus on the 1990s. It will contain the following plays: Sunspots by Leo- poblaha, The End of the Society by Jost Topy, Slavomir Mrozek’s Tango and Istvan Orkany’s Welcoming the Major.”

“Visegrad Drama” consists of sixteen modern pieces accompanied by essays, criticism and photographic documentation. The themes of the volumes were decided at the initial meeting of the four representatives of the four V4 countries in 1998. The current volume, prepared by the Czech team will focus on the 1990s. It will contain the following plays: Sunspots by Leo-

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The V4 members have also stressed the need to realise the mitigation measures needed to achieve the goals of the Kyoto Protocol. They also want negative historical reminiscences to burdens the development of contemporary Slovak-Hungarian, Polish-Slovak and Czech-Slovak relations. The Slovak and Hungarian historians is preparing a publication about our common history, which should fulfill an important task to go through and sum up the problems and differences between the viewpoints of the Slovak and Hungarian historians on past events in central Europe, which should help further work, discussion and cooperation between the neighbouring historiographies.

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