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A ‘voters’ revolution’ is how one analyst described this year’s election results. pg 2

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Fidesz’s overwhelming victory in the April election gives it a strong mandate. pg 2

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The death of the Polish president shook the country and led to an early election. pg 2

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The Slovak Spectator (TSS): Slovakia took over the rotating presidency of the Visegrad Group (V4) when the V4 was still struggling with the economic crisis and after three of the four countries had recently changed governments. Will these events have an impact on the Slovak presidency? Mikuláš Dzurinda (MDZ): setting off economic growth, pushing down the deficit, and consolidating public finances are the most important tasks of all the Visegrad countries. Also within the V4 we are thus focusing on supporting projects and those forms of regional and cross-border cooperation that contribute not only to easing the impacts of the crisis but also to the revival of economic cooperation. We are now halfway into our presidency and the crisis remains a great challenge for us. But as with the change of governments after this year’s elections in the V4 countries, the crisis has not impacted the smooth takeover of the chair from the previous Hungarian presidency. V4 cooperation stands on firm ground and therefore the crisis or changes in governments are rather an impulsion for boosting this cooperation rather than a reason for worry. This has actually been confirmed even now as Slovakia has brought new dynamics to V4 cooperation; we have strengthened the consultation mechanisms ahead of the meeting of the European Council and other EU bodies at the level of ministers or high departmental representatives. 

See MDZ pg 6

V4 countries move to the right

BY MICHAELA TERENZANI
Spectator staff

2010 has been a turbulent year for all the countries of the Visegrad Group. Hard-fought battles, often marked by nationalist sentiment and efforts to blame the impact of the economic crisis on opposing parties, preceded the parliamentary elections in Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Poland, where elections are expected to take place in 2011, faced its own trial: the country lived through the tragic death of its president in the spring and then the presidential race which ensued. Observers agree that the general elections, which saw a change of government in all three countries that held them, have been the focus of attention this year, representing as they did a fairly big regional shift. “We are witnessing in central Europe, and especially in the Visegrad region, a unique situation when more or less all the Visegrad countries have given power to ruling coalitions with the same orientation,” Tomáš Strážay, an expert on the Visegrad Group who works as an analyst at the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (SFPA) think tank, told The Slovak Spectator. As Kevin Deegan-Krause, a political analyst from Wayne State University in the United States, points out, the rise of newcomers was also important in every major election in the region: Jobbik and Politics Can Be Different in Hungary, Public Affairs (SV) and TOP09 in the Czech Republic, and Freedom and Solidarity (SAS) and Most-Híd in Slovakia. As Deegan-Krause tells The Slovak Spectator, “they are also likely to be shorter-lived than their predecessors and therefore more likely to continue or even intensify a cycle of new-party rise and fall.”

For reports on each V4 country, see pg 2
THE OVERWHELMING trend in Czech politics in 2010 is what political analyst Jiří Pehe calls a “voters’ revolution.” This phenomenon had been underestimated. However, it remained stillborn at the ballot box. The revolution began under Prime Minister Jan Fischer’s caretaker government, which stayed in office for more than a year before following a botched attempt at calling early elections in October 2009. The apolitical nature of Fischer, former head of the Czech Statistical Office (CSO), offered little for citizens to get excited about, that is until the government’s final days, which saw ministries push through a series of major, but completely unexpected, spending projects — including a Kčs 86.2 billion (around €3.04 billion), 25-year loan contract to renovate and manage a military hospital that was signed only a day before general election voting began on May 28.

In that election, public anger at the political status quo erupted, with the country’s two largest and most-establised parties — the Civic Democrats’ (ODS) and Social Democrats (CSSD) — shedding votes to newcomers. “Between the two of them they lost 1.3 million voters,” said Pehe, a former aide to Prime Minister Vaclav Havel, and now director of New York University in Prague.

While the poll saw the CSSD take more votes than any other single party, it was more notable for the rise of two nascent political parties — the right-leaning TOP 09 and the populist Public Affairs (VV) party. The election marked the first time ever that the ODS failed to take the most votes in Prague, losing out to TOP 09, and the party founded by President Vaclav Klaus would fail again in the capital during October local elections. Still, political manoeuvring has allowed the ODS to keep control of both the premiership (Prime Minister Petr Necas) and mayor’s seat (Bohuslav Sobotka). Much like elsewhere in central Europe, the Neças government — comprised of an ODS-TOP 09-VV coalition — quickly set about slashing public spending. This included doing away with the Human Rights Ministry altogether.

After downgrading former minister Martin Kocôl’s portfolio, Neças and allies forced Kocôl out of office completely in September. That post, as head of the government’s commission on human rights, remains vacant and the commission has not met in months. A November visit by the human rights commissioner from the Council of Europe saw the government again under the microscope for its policies towards the Roma minority. This time, the Council noted that virtually nothing had been done to address the findings of a 2007 European Court of Human Rights ruling that Czech schools systematically diverted Roma children into special education classes, even when it wasn’t needed.

The aforementioned local elections in October were paired with a vote to fill one-third of the seats in the senate. That vote saw the CSSD secure an overall majority in the upper house of parliament for the first time ever and also led to an ODS-CSSD grand coalition in Prague City Hall.

TOP 09 took the most seats on the Prague City Assembly, meaning former head of the Czech National Bank (CNR) Zdenek Tuma looked poised to become mayor.

The election marked the outbreak of a new wave of liberalism in the Czech political system. While voters did not vote for parties with a center-right philosophy, they did vote to overthrow the first female prime minister, Iveta Radičová, and replace her with a center-left coalition led by the Civic Democrats’ Iveta Radičová. The political analyst Jiří Pehe attributes the election victory to a combination of factors, including an economic downturn, the high profile of the government’s corruption scandals, and the desire of voters to steer the country in a different direction.

According to the latest constitutional draft released on December 1, the new government seems likely to grant voting rights to noncitizens without residence requirements. A second major sector of developments concerns economic policy and has deep and continuing ramifications for constitutional order. The Hungarian government’s response to pressures from the International Monetary Fund, the European Union and investors for addressing its serious economic problems has so far been to privilege taxation on businesses and banks over implementing an austerity plan. Its commitment to these policies has led the Orban government to introduce some fundamental changes in the purview of the Constitutional Council and other constitutional oversight bodies in order to prevent these institutions from blocking the new taxes.

The introduction of the tax schemes, which particularly hit foreign investors, and the quasi-nationalisation of the pension scheme show a particular strain on foreign business, which exemplifies the idea of national solidarity and power.

Moves in the fields of culture and society also point to efforts of the Hungarian government to rewrite “the large book of the Hungarian nation” through strengthening patriotic feelings.

Family-friendly policies and the extension of citizenship rights to those Hungarians beyond borders who strive towards halting the decrease in the Hungarian population, which recently fell below 10 million.

The new constitution is expected to signal in its preamble a return to a moral order based on stronger religious values and references to Hungary’s Christian heritage, although the last available draft does not indicate a radical overhaul of the constitutional system. Despite a marked nationalist strain in governmental policies, it is noteworthy that the issue of the Roma minority has largely been taken off the front of the political scene in an effort to downplay one of the extreme right’s main winning issues.

Hungary’s move to extend citizenship to ethnic Hungarians beyond its borders has brought renewed intensity to the ongoing tension between Slovakia and its southern neighbour over ethnic minorities and historical territorial rights. Slovakia heightened the stakes by voting to amend its own citizenship law, in effect stripping anyone of its Slovak citizenship if they apply for Hungarian citizenship.

Preparations for the Hungarian presidency in the EU in the first half of 2011 and the desire of the new government to take a leading role in the region have led to smoother relations with a number of countries of the western Balkans.

Slovakia’s move to extend citizenship rights to more than 2.5 million Hungarians living in Slovakia was condemned on all sides. Numbers of applicants are estimated by the government at between 250,000 and 400,000 in the first year.

The atmosphere before the elections suggested that there were strong feelings against the Fico government among some groups of citizens. For instance, minoritists felt many of the actions of the past government were directed against them. High expectations among the voters backing the currently ruling centre-right parties focused on a better public expenditure and more aggressive action against corruption. See SK pg 7

VOTE REVOLUTION in Czech politics

Slovakia grapples with reforms

“Voter revolution” in Czech politics

BY MICHAELA TENERANZI

Slovakia saw its leftist prime minister, Robert Fico, move into parliamentary opposition after the general election this June. The four centre-right parties managed to form a coalition government are expected not only to set the country on a path of reduced public expenditures and a smaller budget deficit but also to deal with numerous complaints about the condition of the country’s judiciary, improve transparency in public administration and attempt to heal what had become a tense bilateral relationship with Hungary.

Political analyst Kevin Deegan-Krause of Wayne State University, who says the June election and the change in government did not bring about much of an alteration in international perceptions of Slovakia. “The country has demonstrated its pro-Western international commitments and orientation well enough to ensure that there are fewer suspicions and more benefit of the doubt,” Deegan-Krause told The Slovakian, explaining that the Fico government, despite its problematic coalition partners and scandals, did not fundamentally threaten Slovakia’s domestic or international orientation. “I suspect that some businesses and government officials are slightly relieved but I don’t think the Fico government is on the cusp of change as in, say, 1993.”

BY MICHAELA TENERANZI

Although when evaluating the first days of the new government led by Iveta Radičová, the first female prime minister in the country, political analyst Gregorij Meszarócz said “the central government is slowly renovating liberal democracy; that is a fact that cannot be overlooked”.

First female prime minister

BY MICHAELA TENERANZI

In the aftermath of the political trauma of the Smolensk plane crash, the Slovak government has been busy with reforms aimed at healing what had become a scandalous hole in the country’s political system. The election of a new prime minister, Robert Fico, was expected to bring a fresh start for the country, but the new government has faced numerous challenges, including protests from former government leaders and the European Union.

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The Government was formed in 2010 by the centrist Freedom and Solidarity (Smer) party under the leadership of Robert Fico, leader of the centrist opposition Social Democratic Party (SDS), who was fielded as the candidate of the governing centre-left coalition of SDS and the Free Democratic Party (SZDS).

The government is led by Iveta Radičová, a former lawyer and head of the New Directions Association, who was appointed as the first female prime minister of the country.

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First female prime minister
Divergence in economic paths

BY TAMÁS NOVÁK
special to the Spectator

WHEN entering the European Union, the four Visegrad Group countries were more or less homogeneous in their development paths. This cannot be considered true any longer as each of the economies in the central European region are now formulating different economic strategies under the changed domestic and international conditions and the deep economic crisis over the past two years has required significant adjustments by all four countries.

The development of the Hungarian economy has diverged from the other Visegrad countries in the last few years. This principally manifested itself in a substantial slower economic growth even as 2006-2007, well before the global financial and economic crisis unfolded. Hungary’s lag in growth is most evident and is often compared to the development of the other states that joined the EU in 2004. The Hungarian adverse developments have been clearly visible in international comparisons and they increasingly point towards a long-term trend that could be difficult to reverse. This also means that the homogeneity that existed among the economies in the four Visegrad countries in their development paths upon entering the EU has now disappeared.

The economic crisis and the changing domestic and international conditions. These strategies can be seen as different from the recent past in two aspects. The first is that achieving fiscal balance is becoming a number one priority and the second is that growth should be based more on saving and not on easy credit. These aspects are affecting the region’s countries differently because they did not start at an identical initial position but nevertheless the maintenance of the ‘new’ economic policy point in these directions.

Austerity packages have spurred protests. 

"Visegrad countries are low-cost locations and capacities in certain sectors are modern and very competitive."

The economies of the central European region are formulating different economic strategies under the changed domestic and international conditions. This situation can be seen as different from the recent past in two aspects. The first is that achieving fiscal balance is becoming a number one priority and the second is that growth should be based more on saving than on easy credit. These aspects are on the contrary to the EU countries.

From the perspective of growth and convergence has been widely discussed (investments, consumption) and external factors (capital flows, trade) it is evident that the new member states which have coped better with the crisis are those which had produced high but not overheated growth since accession and are an appropriate model of external and internal financial stability, a low budget deficit and control of a healthy public debt indicator. In the case of Poland, an additional factor prevented a larger downturn: credit-based consumption and investment was much more widespread in other countries in the wider central European region than in Poland, in which the financial deepening was slower. In other states where credit was a more influential factor in increasing demand, the sudden crash in the financial markets resulted in a demand shock, or in other words that overconsumption had to be cut back on to avoid a recession. This shock was much bigger in other countries than in Poland.

The expectation for the post-accession period was that the need to comply with the Maastricht criteria would push the central European countries to decrease the economic disparities between their countries and the earlier EU member states. The indirect harmonisation of economic policies were supposed to be a tool to support convergences between their economies. In the longer run it is certainly true that outside pressures have indirectly helped certain convergence of economic policies between the Visegrad countries independently from economic policy coordination. This coordination has been almost non-existent during the past two decades and only serious economic security threats could alter the situation. This is exactly the case currently; however, the developments in the region hint that the tools of the regions’ countries are different and the divergent economies of Hungary and the others.

The government in Hungary has taken the first moment to stabilise its public finances with revenue increases which are based on additional sectoral taxes and the channelling of private savings in the pension system into the state budget while at the same time cutting income taxes for high households and the corporate sector. Due to these steps the Hungarian budgetary position in the short run will be in balance but in the longer term certain consequences cannot be foreseen at the moment. The sustainability of Hungary’s public finances as well as its transfer system (pensions, social transfers, etc.) will be questionable after 2012-2013.

Revenue side stabilisation has been rarely successful in the past 15-20 years in Europe. The mainstream stabilisation efforts in Europe, which were followed in the Visegrad countries as well, are much more based on the spending side. This difference explains why the future budget position and debt risk in Hungary and in the other three Visegrad countries is judged differently at the moment by the international actors. This is because the recent downgrading of Hungary’s sovereign debt by Moody’s, which is unique in the entire country including the Baaz category, while Czech and Slovak ratings are A1 and the Polish rating is A2.

The changing international strategies of global firms can be interesting for all the Visegrad countries. Many firms are forced to search for further cost-cutting in order to regain their competitiveness in the face of an economic environment where demand in several sectors is expected to stabilise at a level lower than before the crisis. In these circumstances firms are eagerly looking for cost-cutting measures and this may result in large firms rethinking their European strategy, leading to the closure of high-cost production facilities and the relocation to lower-cost countries. As big multinationals are deterred in this process from closing facilities in their home countries (for example because of high remuneration charges) some major western European countries) they may choose to downsize their production in other high-wage countries.

Visegrad countries are low-cost locations and capacities in certain sectors are modern and very competitive. The SARIO experts added that about 64 million people ... of the region which resulted in a significant decline in the region’s short-term attractiveness.

"Visegrad countries are low-cost locations and capacities in certain sectors are modern and very competitive."
**By Jana Liptáková**
Staff writer

The V4 economic recovery is still at an early stage, with the Czech Republic leading the way. The region’s economic performance was the strongest of any in Europe in 2009, driven by the Czech Republic’s impressive growth, which was followed by several years of slower, but still impressive growth. The Czech economy grew by 3.5% in 2009, compared to 2.2% in 2010, and is forecast to grow at a rate of 2.2% in 2011. The Czech Republic is also seen as being in better condition than the other V4 countries, with the exception of Poland.

Poland registered the highest GDP growth of any country in Europe in 2009, growing by 1.7%. In fact, it was the only EU country to register positive growth. "But compared to the previous years, e.g. 6.2% in 2006 and 6.6% in 2007, it cannot be said that Poland was 'the green island on the red sea' because it was growing at 1.5 percentage points, similar to Spain, Portugal, France and Hungary," Łukasz Pokrywka, coordinator of the economy and finance programme at the Krakow-based think tank Kosciuszko Institute, told The Slovak Spectator. "Poland did not register the highest or lowest level of economic growth, it is below its potential level, estimated at 4.0 to 4.2% for 2009-10." The labour market in Poland was hit hard, with the unemployment rate increasing significantly, but Pokrywka sees it as being in better condition than the other V4 countries, with the exception of the Czech Republic.

Pokrywka identified six reasons why Poland avoided a technical recession. The first was a technical recession, the second was the temporary level of external debt. "The depreciation of the Polish currency created external demand for our goods and services, which became cheaper," said Pokrywka. "That fact increased exports and finally GDP. But on the other hand it also increased the temporary level of external debt," he added. That he added that Poland has an underdeveloped banking sector Polish banks did not invest in financial innovation, but rather in "tedious assets" into their portfolios. Poland has a diversified GDP structure in which foreign trade accounts for about 40% compared to 80-90% in Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

Among other reasons listed by Pokrywka were the high level of potential production, EU funds and consolidated financial supervision, which encouraged a conservative lending. Of the V4 countries, the Hungarian economy contracted the most in 2009, by 6.7 percent, according to Eurostat. Slovakia followed with 4.8 percent and the Czech Republic with 4.1 percent.

"Just like the whole region, Hungary also faced a serious (around 20-25 percent) fall in export demand just after the fall of Lehman, as Hungarian manufacturing – like that of Slovakia and the Czech Republic – also specialized in high value-added investment and durable consumer goods, for which demand is highly pro-cyclical," Gergely Tardos, head of research at OTP Bank, told The Slovak Spectator. "But in Hungary the fall in domestic demand was sharper due to the fiscal adjustment and the higher share of foreign exchange loans than in other countries. Consumption in Hungary fell by more than 7 percent in 2009, compared to the 1-2 per cent range in other V4 countries and a further fall of 3 percent in the rate of export growth in 2010, the other three countries growth is expected. "Therefore the recession was also deeper in Hungary than in our regional peers and the recovery is also slower," said Tardos, adding that Hungarians citizens faced a more serious recession than the other V4 countries, and had to cut back their consumption much more sharply.

Slovakia, as an extremely open economy dependent on external demand, could not escape the consequences of a sharp decline in export orders at the turn of 2008 and 2009, according to Vladimir Vahó, chief analyst for Volksbank Slowakei. "It was the sharp decline in exports, by 16.5 percent year-on-year in 2009, that pulled Slovakia into recession last year," Vaňo told The Slovak Spectator. "The international comparison of real GDP performance during the recession is inevitably skewed by the extent to which a particular country is dependent on external demand." Moreover, especially when compared side by side with its regional peers, the past year was also influenced by a relatively higher real effective exchange rate, i.e. the stronger performance of Slovakia in 2008. In international comparisons, the real annual decline of -4.8 in 2009 compared less favourably than with the Czech Republic (-4.1 percent), and especially Poland (+1.7%). However, in the case of the Czech Republic, Vaňo said it is important to keep in mind the lower comparison base from 2008, when the Slovak economy grew by 5.8 percent, compared with just 2.1 percent in the case of the Czech Republic.

"The benefits of the lucky timing of euro adoption are already being felt in the stronger recovery of the Slovak economy in 2010," Vaňo said, adding that while Slovakia is expected to grow at close to 4 percent, the neighbouring economies are expected to recover by between 1 and 2 percent.

The economy of the Czech Republic is closely inter connected with the German economy. David Marek, an analyst for Finanstat, told the Czech Finance Minister that once the recovery gets underway elsewhere, it will pull up the Visegrad economies as well," he said. "A potential major threat is the prospect of the eurozone collapsing or shrinking. While the probability of this happening is still extremely low, it is no longer zero. Depending on how this unfolds, it may affect the V4 economies, either because it will aggravate and prolong the crisis or because investors will respond to the euro’s troubles (or indeed precipitate them) by fleeing the emerging and peripheral countries in Europe." According to analysts, the courage of national governments in carrying out reforms could be crucial for their countries’ future economic development.

The percentage change in Poland’s GDP is in 2010 is estimated at 2.5 percent and the forecast for 2011 is between 4 and 5 percent. "In my opinion, the future of the Polish economy is dependent on the international situation and public finance reform," said Pokrywka. According to Vaňo, in 2010 and 2011 Slovakia stands in a strong position to become the regional front-runner in terms of economic recovery. "The most intriguing question for the upcoming two years is whether the new Slovak government will be able to fulfil its fiscal consolidation commitment," Vaňo said. "If the fiscal consolidation does not materialise as it is planned for the upcoming five years, Slovakia’s credit rating, sovereign spreads and inevitably also the interest rates charged for private loans might be at stake. I am a little bit afraid that the importance of sound public finance remains underestimated in Slovakia." The Czech Finance Minister predicts that country’s economic growth will be 2.2 percent in 2010, and forecasts a slight slowdown to 2 percent in 2011. The SITA news wire reported. Hungary expects that the economic growth will speed up, reaching 3.4 percent in the coming years. Domestic demand is also forecast to increase in 2011. "The most important factor influencing Hungary’s economic performance will certainly be the external environment," said Tardos. "Hungary is a small, open economy, heavily dependent on exports and German economic growth. The second factor is that as the heavily influence growth is whether the structural reforms are carried out in a successful way."

**Tackling the crisis**

**Czech Republic**

**Capital:** Prague

**Area:** 78,846 sqkm

**Population:** 10.5 million*

**Population by ethnic composition:** Czech (90.4%), Moravian and Silesian (3.8%), Slovak (1.8%), Polish (0.7%), German (0.1%), Roma (0.1%), Hungarians, Ukrainians, Russians (Russians), Czechs, Greeks, and others (2.8%).

**Currency:** Czech koruna

**Average monthly wage in 2009:** €557.5*

**Real GDP growth rate:** 4.1 percent (2009), 2.4 percent (estimate for 2010)

**GDP per capita in Purchasing Power Standards in 2009 (EU-27 = 100):** 80*

**Unemployment rate:** 6.9 percent (November 2010)*

**Hungary**

**Capital:** Budapest

**Area:** 93,086 sqkm

**Population:** 10 million*

**Population by ethnic composition:** Hungarian 92.3%, 200-220,000 Germans, 100-110,000 Slovaks, 80-90,000 Croats, 25,000 Romansians, 5,000 Serbs, 5,000 Slovones, 10,000 Polish, 3,000 Greeks, 1,500 Armenians, 3,000 Bulgarians, 6,000 Vietnamese, 2,000 Ukrainians.

**According to estimates there are about 400-600,000 Roma living in Hungary**

**Currency:** Hungarian forint

**Average monthly wage in 2009:** €739.23*

**Real GDP growth rate:** 6.7 percent (2009), 1.1 percent (estimate for 2010)

**GDP per capita in Purchasing Power Standards in 2009 (EU-27 = 100):** 65*

**Unemployment rate:** 10.9 percent (November 2010)*

**Poland**

**Capital:** Warsaw

**Area:** 312,685 sqkm

**Population:** 38.2 million*

**Population by ethnic composition:** Poles (circa 97.8%), other groups (circa 1 million people): Germans, Ukrainians, Belarussians, Lemkos, Roma, Lithuanians, Slovaks, Russians, Jews, Armenians, Tattars, Czechs and Karaims.

**Currency:** Polish zloty

**Average monthly wage in 2009:** €785.79*

**Real GDP growth rate:** 1.7 percent (2009), 3.5 percent (estimate for 2010)*

**GDP per capita in Purchasing Power Standards in 2009 (EU-27 = 100):** 77*

**Unemployment rate:** 9.7 percent (November 2010)*

**Slovakia**

**Capital:** Bratislava

**Area:** 49,035 sqkm

**Population:** 5.4 million*

**Population by ethnic composition:** Slovak (85.8%), Hungarian (9.7%), Roma (1.7%), Czech (0.8%), Ruthenian, Ukrainian, Russian, German, Polish and other (2%)

**Currency:** euro (until 2009, Slovak koruna)

**Average monthly wage in 2009:** €744.50*

**Real GDP growth rate:** 4.8 percent (2009), 4.1 percent (estimate for 2010)*

**GDP per capita in Purchasing Power Standards in 2009 (EU-27 = 100):** 71*

**Unemployment rate:** 14.7 percent (November 2010)*

Source: www.visegradgroup.eu, *Eurostat, **SARIO Compiled by Spectator staff

**Doing business in the V4**

Slovakia enjoys the best environment for doing business among the V4 countries according to the Doing Business 2011 report prepared by the World Bank. Of the 183 evaluated countries, Slovakia placed 41st, down one ranking compared with last year. All three other V4 members improved their positions: Hungary jumped from 52nd to 46th, the Czech Republic moved from 62nd to 63rd and Poland improved its ranking from 73rd to 76th.

41. Slovakia (40)

46. Hungary (22)

63. The Czech Republic (62)

70. Poland (73)

Source: Doing Business 2011
A common but contentious history

Lack of self-reflection still hangs like a skeleton in the closets of the V4 countries

By MICHALA TIRENZANI
Spectator staff

CENTRAL Europeans like to believe - and historians often confirm their beliefs - that pain has always been part of this region of the continent, which had to struggle most of the time for its own identity, squeezed between the East and the West. The Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland, sometimes self-perceived as allies in order to be the "significant other" for one another, continue to carry historical baggage that divides as well as unites.

History that unites

The Visegrad group does have some common historical experiences, said historian István Kollai, a deputy director of the Hungarian Cultural Institute in Bratislava, at the start of an interview with The Slovak Spectator.

"However, these experiences are rather general phenomena such as the shared experience that they all had from being ruled by Western, Eastern or Southern (Otto man) empires and states," Kollai said.

According to Roman Holec, a historian from Comenius University, the four countries are obviously located in a common geopolitical space which traditionally has been a buffer territory, a place where power interests of the West and the East had clashed as well as a symbolic edge of Europe by which it was not only divided into the West and the East but not only a common geopolitical space of the Soviet Union and NATO. "Count in the ever-cultivated 19th century nationalism, which also is a legacy of the past, and we’ve got the troublesome character of the region in hand," Holec said, adding that although there are attempts to get the countries to cooperate and focus on their common interests, over-indulgence in spotlighting the past and mutual wrongdoing still divides them.

Holec stated that all four countries of the Visegrad Group tend to seek "profit" from their past sufferings - be it oppression or occupation by another state, mass slaughter, or being the victim of games played by superpowers - they even turn their suffering into a mantra.

Holec noted that Slavakos have cultivated a stereotype of their own 'dove-like character' which does not permit re-membering any part of their slaughtered of their own fellow citizens before and during World War II. "That leads to the search for excuses: ‘other criminals’, pressure from outside, or simply silence," Holec said. "These countries are missing the much-needed and liberating self-reflection of their own past failures and that is also something that connects them in a way. But it is just another counter-productive moment and a ‘skeleton’ which regularly keeps falling from the closets of their own histories."

According to Kollai, the nation-building programmes that the four nations elaborated from the mid-19th century were often based on defining their nation against others, especially the neighbours.

"Before World War I, Hungary played, or often just tried to play, a dominant role on the regional level," Kollai said. "This dominance left negative elements not only among the Slovaks but also, for instance, in Czech historical consciousness."

Kollai said that after World War I all the current Visegrad nations focused solely on their own problems and needs and in attempts to win ‘justice’ for their own nation, often harmed another, noting that these are the memories that burden bilateral relations between, for instance, Slovakia and Hungary even today.

Historic rupture

The legacy of the breakup of the Hungarian Empire, which occurred under contentious circumstances because of World War I, has continued to haunt the countries of the region in the decades that followed and still makes the relations between Slovakia and Hungary the most problematic in the region.

Holec noted that while the history of Hungary in the 20th century is an example of a success story, stating that Slovaks started from zero and made it to a fairytale ending as an independent state and subsequently a member of the European Union and NATO.

"However, the success of the latter has been such a large extent based upon the failure of the first," Holec said. "On top of that, they both like to compare themselves to each other. And if Hungarians on the one hand find it hard to see that at the start of the 21st century Slovaks are more successful, even economically, Slovaks seem not to have grown enough mentally into recognising the state they have achieved. If the former suffer from traumas and cul tivate various illusions, the latter still have their historical complexes as a ‘small history’ and a pointless fear of its traumatised neighbour. This serves as soill for nurturing nationalism, which in turn serves as a fertiliser for its own recycling."

Kollai added that bilateral relations between Hungary and Slovakia also tend to be unstable because politicians on both sides of the Danube tend to deny the basis of the other country’s nation-organising principle.

"Slovak political life is li able to behave as a pure na tional-state, despite the ex istence of a considerable re gional ethnic [Hungarian] community accounting for 10 percent of the whole population," Kollai said. "Hungarian political life op erates within the terms of a ‘cultural’ and ‘political’ cross-border nation which may sound like a gloomy and suspicious expression to Slovak ears. This existing di chotomy between the under lying principles makes the echo of the nationalistic activities so strong."

Continued from p2

But the old country’s guard politicians proved otherwise and after weeks of nego tiation, the ODS and CSSD together entered a deal to maintain control of the cap ital, joining forces to keep the new mayor out of office. The ODS is convinced that TOP is in its main polit ical need and needs to be weakened as much as possible,” said political ana list Bohumil Doležal, who once served as an advisor to Klaus when Klaus was prime minister.

Similar agreements were struck in the country’s second and third four largest cities - Brno, Ostrava and Plzeň respectively. "It’s true this voter re volution has not produced change," Peše said. "The old political powers don’t learn anything, especially the ODS. The ques tion is whether they are not highlig hted from their own ignorance.

Again, public anger boiled over with a massive and widespread protest in early December on the day the new City Assembly officially took its seats. Havel himself appeared at the session to voice his disapproval of the ODS’ absence.

Less than 36 hours after taking office in City Hall, the government’s first crisis scandal broke with a video surfaceing where one ČSSD official offered Kč100,000 (about €4,000) to anyone for revealing a politician who was on the City Council. That council member then seemed to admit the payoff, though he vows to return once his name is cleared. "It’s true that the situation [of a vote] was put together to preserve certain networks and not to serve the people," he said. "One should not be surprised.

"I think opinions are proving to be widespread. "The reason behind the coalition was to maintain influential groups in their positions so they could keep their influence," said Vlastimil Deřováková, director of the political science department at the University of Econom ics Prague.

Continued budget cuts at the local level already have triggered nationwide general strike from public sector unions on December 9, with local leaders and the political opposition voicing disapproval at both the policy and man ner of the Necas government. "It always takes time, but I sense movements in the Czech society," Peše said. "We don’t know yet where that will lead.

Benjamin Cunningham is the editor-in-chief of the Prague Post.

PI: Right-wing parties dominate politics

Continued from p2

Tomáš Strážar, an analy st with the Slovak Political Policy Association, stated that PO is currently strong enough to remain in the run-up to next year’s election, noting that political competition in Poland is practically only between rightist parties – one strictly conservative and the other rather liberal.

"There is no leftist grouping with sufficient power or perspective to be able to replace the rightist government in Poland," Strážar told The Slovak Spectator.

The question rather is whether the current, liberal government headed by PO, will be replaced by the very strong and increas ingly conservative PiS which already ruled the country once."

Strážar also remarked that he might be inclined to use the still-quite-recent Katy air crash in the up-coming parliamentary elec tions campaign.

"But a longer time will be needed since the tragedy and therefore I don’t believe that they will manage to mobilise the voters in such numbers that would bring about a prin cipal change in the political situation in Poland," Strážar said.

"It is not a strong enough movement to mobilise a sufficient part of the electorate in favour of the brother of the late pre sident and his party," he ad ded.

Katy, however, keeps making news, most recently during the visit of Russian President Dmitry Medvedev to Warsaw, which was pre ceded by Russia handing over two killings, which were re lated to the massacre in 1940, when Stalin’s NKVD secret police murdered 22,000 Polish officers and then for several decades blamed Germany for the killings.

After the fall of com munism, Russia was willingly admitted its guilt but did not disclose all historical documents until recently. On November 26 the Russian Duma directly rejected a memo randum in a rare condem na tion of the dictator, in a move that also meant an attempt by Moscow to improve ties with Poland, the Reuters newswire reported.
**V4 – TOURISM**

**TSS: Which key topics have been given the strongest emphasis by the Slovak presidency?**

MDZ: The slogan of our presidency is Effect-  

ive V4 – TOURISM. Continued from pag 1  

Visegrad Group member status is a great  

asset for their region as an attractive  

tourist destination and the scope of their joint initiatives is  

branded as European Quartet, One Melody – has been further extended. Earlier this year national tourist boards travelled as far as China, India and the US to promote the region, which comprises Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia. India was identified as a prospective market and the marketing plan of national tourist boards of V4 member countries for 2011 includes strengthening the V4 presence in India.  

“In 2010 we selected the markets of the USA, Japan, China, Russia and for the first time also Brazil to showcase central Europe as a tourist region,” Emília Kubík, senior specialist at the marketing-planning department of the Polish Tourist Organisation, told The Spectator.  

“We focus mostly on promotion of cities and cultural tourism in all these markets. A special product for the Russian market is spa and wellness tourism focused on the healing properties of Brazilian markets it is Jewish heritage. Most of the initiatives that we jointly carry out are strongly on the market,  

New Delhi, the leading B2B market, and Mumbai, Kolkata, Bangalore and Chennai followed by an info tour for Indian tour operators and cooperation with Indian media.  

“The Polish Tourism Organisation, in cooperation with the Visegrad Group, has organised a road show in Beijing and Canton,” Roman Gudzikowski, marketing manager at the Polish National Tourist Office in London told The Spectator, adding that the Polish National Tourist Office has participated in two events organised under the V4 banner in Ireland. The first event, held in May at the Czech Embassy, focused on the tourism potential of central European spas, and the other event, held on October 19 at the Slovak Embassy in Ballarat, focused on winter holidays.  

“In 2010 we have observed increasing interest in such products as spas, Jewish culture and UNESCO heritage sites,” Gudzikowski said, adding that cooperation with other V4 members in the tourism sector has been very suc-  

cessful Slovakia.  

The national tourist boards plan to continue joint promotion of the V4 region in overseas markets.  

“In 2011 the presentation will be extended with the market of Brazil, which in 2010 we carried out a survey among Brazilian tour operators to find out their interests,” Lukáčová of SACR said, adding that next year V4 countries will spend €100,000 more on joint promotion.  

“In 2011 we will also launch a new European Quar-  

tet corporate website focused on presentation of our joint activities and projects.  

All four V4 countries have felt the effects of the global eco-  

nomic crisis on their tourism sectors, but some have been hit harder than others.  

“Poland’s tourism industry appears to be quite resilient, flexible and can quickly adapt to new challenges and the tourism economic downturn appears to be already in the past,” Lukáčová said, adding that based on preliminary information this growth trend is expected to continue in the winter season.  

Polish tour operators were quick to launch alternative products. Poland has always been attractively priced for UK tourists, and there are wealthy enough to feel several of the effects from the crisis.”  

The tourism industry was facing hard times but is on the way to recovery, according Mark Kincses from the Hungarian National Tourist Office.  

“Business tourism has dropped and leisure had to set new, less optimistic targets,” Kincses told The Slovak Spec-  

tator. “But lower occupancy levels resulted in strong com-  

petition for higher prices, so from the tourist perspective Hungary became a destination where high-quality services are available for favourable prices – [meaning] excellent value for money.”  

According to Lukáčová, registered a signifi-  

cant drop in the number of tourists from main markets, i.e. the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary. The im-  

pact on the industry has been worsened by Slovakia’s adop- 

tion of the euro, which coupled with decreased earning curren-  

cies of neighbouring countries made Slovakia a relatively ex- 

pensive destination.  

Lukáčová believes that the situation is now improving across the whole of the region and all four countries are re-  

porting an increase in tourist numbers.  

“Since 2010 all four V4 countries have felt the effects of the global eco-  

nomic crisis on their tourism sectors, but some have been hit harder than others.  

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media confront similar challenges

BY MICHALA TERENZANI Spectator staff

Over the past two decades since the fall of communism in the region, media outlets in Central Europe have needed to grow more independent from their countries’ governments, learn how to incorporate new technologies into their business models, and find financial success in turbulent markets.

The media is freer, but also feels less secure.

Photo: SITA

A media law before parliament will allow [the government] to stack the deck in their favour by appointing members to the overseeing Media Council. This means that the government the socialists had a majority so there is no surprise that the new government wants to clean house. My opinion is that the media is really enjoying its life, but perhaps it has something to do with trying to get information out quickly. From the backdrop will fall out of a story. Furthermore, there is a lot of press release reporting especially in the case of business. A lot of PR gets published that has no business being published.

Local governments are also allowed to publish their own newspapers on local affairs and that just kills independent papers. Another trend is observable now: websites of journalists who want to comment on politics independently of their publishers.

One of the largest problems facing media in Poland is lack of financing, just like in any other media. If we move from print media to other formats, one challenge is for old media to embrace the internet in a constructive way.

The socialists who lost power after eight years were more media-friendly and more professional than the new Fidesz government. Most of the media have a left-wing bias so it is no surprise that public reactions are not easy. The previous government also tended to use the media, especially for the sake of showing its presence. Fidesz has a two-thirds majority. It does what it wants rather than worrying about what reaction in the press will be. It makes many politicians who are used to a more conciliatory approach uncomfortable here and abroad. I am not sure if it will continue to work as it needs to be handled with care.

The Hungarian government sees it as its duty to help the accession of these countries to the European Union, particularly as the case of Croatia, due to close most of its negotiation chapters in 2011. Similarly, after decades of poor relations with Romania, Hungary has come to terms with it; the decades of Russian, which would allow citizens of both countries to travel, is still a priority. The European Commission has noted that the latter position has met with negative responses from Brussels and some EU officials but also with some sympathy on the part of the European public, politicians and journalists, and therefore the threat that Slovakia’s position in the EU and its international image would be severely damaged by not participating in the Greek bailout was not fully realised.

“Thatarewasinmyopinion the beginning of the end. We made the new government different from its predecessors; thanks to which Slovakia made itself visible,” Strážay told The Slovak Spectator.

HU: V4 still a priority?

Continued from pg2

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SK: Dual citizenship issue still unresolved

But after the first 100 days there was not much else observers were praising about the new government’s performance, with critical voices saying the government had not been sufficiently active in overturning legislation that the parties had vehemently criticized when in opposition; issues such as minority-related legislation and the law on language, which brought tension between Slovakia and Hungary to a peak, as well as a previously modified press code which generated criticism from the media and the international community.

Radiovisandherministersdefendedtheirgovernmentby saying it had to deal with several tough issues during the initial weeks of office: summer floods that hit large parts of Slovakia as well as an economic crisis, which, despite Slovakia’s decision not to participate in the EU loan package for Greece.

Tomáš Strážay of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association noted that the latter position has met with negative responses from Brussels and some EU officials but also with some sympathy on the part of the European public, politicians and journalists, and therefore the threat that Slovakia’s position in the EU and its international image would be severely damaged by not participating in the Greek bailout was not fully realised.

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Hungarys positionhasmetwithnegativereactionsinBrusselsandfromseveralEUofficialsbutalsowithsomecreditongroupsofnewsandeventsofanewqualityalsowithsomecredit.Wedidwhatwewantedandweneededtoshowthatwewereable.

Are relations problematic or tolerated?

The relations are clearly on a bad track. It does what it wants regardless of how it will be perceived. There is little respect for the other party and for the people involved. It is more like a private relationship between the politicians and PACs.

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Clear efforts to strengthen relations with Romania and the Czech Republic have not significantly improved the Hungarian side’s position.

Béniédicte Williams is a writer at the Budapest Times.

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Visegrad Scholarship Programme

The International Visegrad Fund (IVF) offers master’s and post-graduate scholarships to selected students for periods of one to four semesters, with the exception of master’s scholarships within the In-coming programme in which one- to four-semester scholarships can be awarded. With an annual budget of €6,480,000, the IVF will award scholarships for about 400 semesters in the academic year 2010/2011.

Applicants whose current university or employer is further than 1,500 km from the selected host university/institute are eligible for a one-time travel grant.

Citizens of the following countries can 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 apply to scholars from Kosovo.

Scholarship schemes:

Intra-Visegrad Scholarships

This is for scholars coming from one of the V4 countries who plan to study in a V4 country other than that of their citizenship at any accredited public or private university or institute of any of the country’s national academy of sciences. Successful applicants within this scheme will receive scholarships of €2,300/semester and the corresponding host universities/institutes receive €1,500/semester/scholar.

Out-Going Scholarships

This is for current or master’s degree holders in V4 countries to study at accredited public or private universities or institutes of the respective national academies of sciences in four countries. Citizens of the following four countries are eligible for In-coming scholarships: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Georgia, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, the Russian Federation, Serbia and Ukraine as well as scholars from Kosovo. Successful applicants within this scheme will receive scholarships of €2,300/semester and the corresponding host universities/institutes receive €1,500/semester/scholar.

In-Coming Scholarships

In-Coming Scholarships are available for V4 scholarships for V4 citizens who wish to study at accredited public or private universities or institutes of the respective national academies of sciences in the following countries: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Georgia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Ukraine as well as universities in Kosovo. Successful applicants within this scheme will receive scholarships of €2,300/semester and the corresponding host universities/institutes receive €1,500/semester/scholar.

Scholarships for Belarussian students

The programme is for Belarussian scholars who wish to study at accredited public or private universities or institutes of the academies of sciences in V4 countries (altogether 60 semesters annually).

Scholarships for Ukrainian students

The programme is for Ukrainian scholars who wish to study at accredited public or private universities or institutes of the academies of sciences in V4 countries (altogether 60 semesters annually).

Visegrad Scholarships at OSA Archivum (a separate programme)

If selected, each scholar receives scholarship funding at the beginning of each five-month period (semester) upon a written confirmation from the host university/institution.

The deadline for all scholarship applications is January 31. The results are announced by mid-May.

For more information go to, http://visegradfund.org/scholarships

By DOMINICA UHRÍKOVÁ

Spectator staff

GLOBETROTTERS students and researchers can nowadays enjoy a seemingly endless variety of different grants and scholarships; however, those coming from or within the Visegrad region have an extra ace in the hole since V4 countries have recently been particularly eager to enhance the ties with the rest of Europe by encouraging young people to leave the comfort zone of their homes and get a taste of life abroad.

Among the principal institutions providing grant support for student and researcher travel in the surrounding European regions, the first and one of the most important continent-wide programmes is the Erasmus mobility scheme: that of being better suited to scholars’ needs.

"We have no such thing as a network of partner institutions, which means that students can choose any accredited university or research centre they please, including private entities," he stated. "So our scholars have much more responsibility, as they have to find their host institutions themselves, but, at the same time, they have much more freedom."

Other advantages include the possibility of obtaining several consecutive scholarships, the possibility of receiving support for up to 4 academic terms.

No fear of ‘brain drain’

"Though it might not seem obvious at first sight, the IVF does not support mobility so that people can leave their country and start a new life overseas. On the contrary, the ultimate aim is to enable young people to gain new experiences and to build competencies that can use in their home countries after returning from abroad."

As Škyora remarked, there is no need to fear ‘brain drain’: the IVF tries not to lose sight of its alumni and figures have clearly confirmed that the latter indeed tend to pursue their careers at home rather than elsewhere.

Such was the case of Bogdan Kotyk, a Ukrainian who obtained an IVF scholarship for a Master’s course in European studies at Comenius University in Bratislava, from which he graduated with a thesis on European cross-border cooperation.

"After graduation I moved back to Kiev, where I enrolled in the reserve of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and started working for an international company," he told The Slovak Spectator. "I am sincerely happy to be home and use my knowledge and skills to help multiple people and the professional experience he gained.

"The past two years were very important and productive for me; I certainly have broadened my horizons," he said. "The on-campus international atmosphere gave me many new friends and brought me closer to Slovak culture, its language and people. At the same time, it was very interesting for me to witness the changes that occurred in the country after Slovakia joined the eurozone."

Martin Čusy from Slovakia, another IVF alumnus, also returned back to his homeland after completing part of his studies in nanotechnology at the University of Technology in Gliwice, Poland.

"I had a chance why he chose to study at this particular school was most importantly its strong position in technological equipment."

As a teacher at the Slovak University of Technology in Trnava, Čusy is currently working on introducing his own device for the preparation of nanocomposites into industrial production. He continues co-operating with Gliwice University, interestingly, on inviting Polish students for excursions to the Trnava laboratories.

Building a central European identity

Those preferring to travel abroad for shorter periods of time may be interested in another initiative, the annual Visegrad Summer School (VSS), organised by the Villa Deiuss Association in the Polish town of Krakow since 2002.

Every year, several dozen students from the V4 region and neighbouring countries are selected to take part in this two-week educational programme consisting of lectures, panel discussions and seminars, alongside challenges relevant to the Visegrad Group region, the EU and the countries of central and eastern Europe.

The line-up of lecturers traditionally includes some of the region’s most noted journalists, politicians and experts.

As for topics regularly dealt with at the VSS, these usually reflect the Villa Deiuss’ main concerns, said Anna Kowalska, VSS co-ordinator.

While in the same year, the lack of a central European identity in the younger generation or the heads of national governments was a major challenge in their opinion, cooperation with neighbouring countries and to other focus on building European partners instead.

"I have noticed that in the first years of the VSS workshop, most applicants tend to be more interested in those parts of the programme that deal with the European or even trans-Atlantic perspectives," she told The Slovak Spectator. "By the end of the event, however, what they indicate is a great deal from the school is an awareness of the role of central European countries and the importance of regional cooperation, the consciousness of being central European as a part of one’s identity, the overview of the stereotypes and the networking experience.

While the mission of the workshop remains the same, the School will take place in the one year to the next, as the VSS team keeps introducing new elements into the programme.

"It would be easy to copy-and-paste the previous scheduled one. "Kowalska explained, "but the international situation is so dynamic that we necessarily have to adjust the programme if we want to tackle the most topical and burning issues."

As Kowalska added, the upcoming edition will be even more interesting to see since the pre-ceeding ones as the VSS will cel-ebrate its 10th birthday in 2011. "We will invite our alumni to come and share their experi-ences with us," she said. "Many of them have finished their studies and are now working as diplomats, entre-preneurs, journalists, lawyer, NGO leaders, and so on. We plan to organise many more interesting lec-tures this time, to give them space for discussing and networking. And it is they who will suggest topics for this special edition."

In the meantime, interested candidates should start brushing up their CVs, Kowalska said. "The competi-tion is so tight that more than 300 applications for the annual VSS are rejected every year."