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Association
for International
Affairs

Žitná 27
CZ 110 00 Praha 1
Tel/Fax +420 224 813 460

—
info@amo.cz
www.amo.cz

THE YEAR OF THE NEW PRESIDENCIES: THE VISEGRAD COUNTRIES IN THE EU

October 25, 2011 – European House, Jungmannova 24, Prague

Organized by the Association for International Affairs in cooperation with Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung

The event was aimed at tackling such questions as the ‘new’ member states’ place among other members of the European Union (EU) – this issue is especially vivid because of such events as, for instance, the politically unsuccessful Czech EU Presidency; the formal and informal mechanisms, if such exist, the Visegrad countries had developed to follow their own goals as well as their expectations from the membership, and the envisaged future of the EU in general and the Visegrad group in particular. These issues are especially high on the agenda now, during the ‘Central European year’ in the EU (both Presidencies being from the Central Europe).

The conference programme was divided into two panels, according to the logic of the issues outlined above. The speakers included officials and experts from all four Visegrad countries (V4): Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia.

Conference Conclusions

During the first panel *What do we want from the EU and how do we get there?* the government representatives of all the V4 countries (except for the Polish one who had to cancel and an NGO representative took part in the panel instead) discussed the nature of the Visegrad cooperation, the issues of the common interest, and the future of the group. The current EU problems and ways the V4 countries could have contributed into the dealing with them were also touched upon.

Addressing the question of what the Visegrad group is, it was stated that the Visegrad cooperation is not an alternative for the EU. It is an additional framework within the Union, along with, for instance, Benelux, and Scandinavian cooperation. The V4 is a very well functioning consultation mechanism that is not however institutionalized. Originally government cooperation has now been extended to the civic and cultural levels as well. Furthermore, it is not locked upon four countries and cooperates with other states. Yet being a part of the Visegrad group a country needs to balance between its ownership of responsibility as the EU member state and the interests of the V4 as a group.

Taking into consideration common historical and cultural heritage the Visegrad countries have a lot of points of common interest. Moreover, the Visegrad group was created to pursue the common interests jointly. The speakers outlined a wide range



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of them during the panel. These issues are also the driving forces behind the Central European cooperation.

- The panellists agreed that the cohesion policy's future developments should be a priority for the V4 cooperation, based on a lot of joint experience the member countries have in this field. The Multi-annual Financial Framework, adopted in June 2011, opens new possibilities for this purpose.
- Energy policy, which covers a broad spectrum of issues from energy security (e.g. nuclear energy) to energy diversification, is a matter of common interest.
- The Enlargement process, namely the Eastern Partnership (which does not deal with the enlargement as such, but could potentially evolve) initiative, and the Balkan states accession are beneficial for all the V4 countries and offer a stage for close cooperation.
- Common security policy is of a high importance, especially concerning the army. One of the panellists described the EU as a security provider in the broadest sense of this word.
- There is Common Agricultural Policy, which though is more important for some states (Poland) and less for the others (e.g. Czech Republic).
- Such issues as taxes and Schengen reform have been also mentioned.

Some speakers also presented short overviews of their countries' Presidencies in the European Council. Successful continuation of the negotiations with Serbia, energy policy, problem of the integration of the Roma people (adaptation of the Roma strategy), Danube Strategy, transport policy (TENT network) were mentioned as the priority areas for the Hungarian Presidency where successful results were achieved. The issues of the common interest currently on the agenda of the Polish Presidency cover the Multi-annual Financial Framework, cohesion policy, and Infrastructure development (TENT, TEE, Digital Agenda).

Tackling the problems the EU is facing, it was stressed that the question of the future of the V4 cannot be answered without understanding of the current processes. The previous political and economic crises have strengthened the EU, but whether it is going to happen this time as well, is the question we need to keep in mind. Especially with all the modifications the EU has undergone over the last decade with the 'Big bang' Enlargement and changes in the level of integration.

The importance of the Solidarity within the European market and the EU as such, which is usually missing from the discourse, e.g. in the Czech Republic, was underlined during the panel. It is especially important with the Eurozone crisis, which is a common problem, every member state will suffer from. There is still a lack of



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understanding that the Greek turmoil is also a problem for all the other member states. For that same purpose it is important that all the member states of the Union are equal and treated in a respectful way. Can the V4 cooperation bring some added value under the Eurocrisis? Do we want to be in an inner circle and really influence the politics or not? These are the questions still to be answered.

The second panel *Expert perspective: Evaluating seven years and three presidencies* comprised representatives of the NGO sector from the Visegrad countries, who provided their evaluation of the V4 member states Presidencies.

The results of the Slovak research of the 'New' Member States' behaviour within the EU were presented. This research had shown that the main 'New' member states characteristics are their pro-integration political culture that came to be as a result of the accession process; reactive rather than pro-active style, (rare pace-setters, occasional foot-draggers, frequent fence-setters); high importance of administrative capacity and coordination. It also proved that the size of the member state as well as the common communist past matter. The preferences of the 'New' member states comprise: external energy security; transatlantic relations; Enlargement (with a focus on Russia and the EaP); finalization of the membership (Schengen, free movement of workers, but there are still problems with the Eurozone entry). The 'New' member states are against deepening in tax, social policies and Justice and Home affairs.

More specifically Slovakia usually acts as a fence-setter, and sometimes as a foot-dragger. Its key preferences cover finishing of the accession process, sovereignty in taxation, foreign policy (Western Balkans, Eastern Neighbourhood) and energy. The crucial role of the administration (not even the government sometimes), namely the Permanent Representation along with very weak participation of the other societal actors and public (except for nuclear lobby) in shaping of the Slovak preferences within the EU were stressed. Political parties usually get involved in publicly attractive topics, whereas transnational companies use other ways to influence the EU affairs.

Addressing the specific nature of the Visegrad group the research has shown that all the member countries usually act as fence-setters. It should be kept in mind that there are differences between small and big states, along with some other diverging points, such as Eurozone (non-)membership, different past legacy, national identity. The competitiveness among the V4 countries exists. The cooperation is undergoing among sectoral ministers and administrations.

The discussion proceeded tackling the nature of the V4. It was argued that during the accession process the V4 countries had been in a similar psychological state and still feel like a second-class member states nowadays. This feeling of inferiority was labelled as Euro-pessimism. The question is whether this feeling could be mitigated?



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It was also stressed that the V4 is not something natural that will always be there. Thus, it should not be taken for granted.

The panel proceeded discussing the V4 countries' Presidencies. The Hungarian Presidency was said to only have limited success. The reasons behind that are as follows: an attempt to separate the domestic and European issues and a series of political scandals.

The Polish Presidency was described as a small scaled one without any grand design. A detailed overview of what had been achieved up to the moment was given: the 6-pack negotiations had been concluded, following the Hungarian Presidency; the EaP Summit carried out; the Correlation table Agreements passed as well as the Annual Financial Framework. The lack of agreement on the Roma issue and Bulgarian Schengen membership are perceived as the biggest failures. The signing of the Croatian accession treaty and a new Association Agreement with Ukraine are seen as the most important perspectives. Polish Presidency was said to be an international confirmation of the process of Europeanization (domestic administrative cooperation) and all the V4 Presidencies – a proof for the need of the Presidencies (something that has been under discussion after the Lisbon).

The Old vs. New member states divide in the EU had transformed into Eurozone vs. non-Eurozone countries, with the former building the core of the EU. It is now a challenge for the non-Eurozone members (three out of four Visegrad countries) to pave their way though into the inner circle.

Policy Recommendations

The conference presentations and discussions have shown that the Visegrad group cooperation is positive and beneficial for all the actors involved. It opens a lot of perspectives for the successful pursuing of the V4 countries' interests, as it had been with the 'coming back to Europe'. To make it even more successful the V4 countries have to identify all the issues of the common interest and pursue cooperation along those lines, for the history has shown that the V4 countries are the strongest when they stick together. Simultaneously, they should protect their diverging interests separately.

Additionally, the experts voiced the following recommendations for the EU in general and the V4 countries in particular:

- Concerning the specific discussed common priorities, it was said that the cohesion policy needs more transparency, moreover, it should be conducted on the national rather than supranational level; the issue of energy security should not be politicised and left for the experts to deal with.



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- The V4 countries should protect their own way of life and their liberties which are not under particular threat at the moment, but it is still very important to stick to the principles.
- It was argued repeatedly that the European Union is at the crossroads and undergoing a crisis, on a scale it possibly had never faced before. To overcome this fundamental turmoil a new deal in the European meaning of this word is needed, similar to the ones made in the past. Two best examples of such decisive deals in the EU history are the Schuman declaration and the Maastricht Treaty. This new deal, in the view of the experts, should be about the content (energy, army and taxes) and the tools (money – saving the euro, budget – taxation, institutions – role of the Commission, Council and the European Parliament) of the EU policy. The dividing lines between the EU and the rest of the Europe as well as within the EU itself should be removed. This deal should not only be aimed at overcoming economic and structural crisis, but also at the bringing back of the citizens' trust.

Report done by Lilia Revak, AMO Intern