



# TOWARDS REGIONAL ADVOCACY FOR COOPERATION IN THE BALKANS VIA EUROPEAN BEST PRACTICES

*A collection of papers and discussions*



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This publication includes findings of research, contributions, and proceedings of the regional conference “Towards Regional Advocacy for Cooperation in the Balkans via European Best Practices” organized by Institute for Democracy and Mediation in (March 2009) in cooperation with Institute of Public Affairs, Warsaw (Poland), International Centre for Democratic Transition, Budapest (Hungary), EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy, Prague (Czech Republic), Slovak Foreign Policy Association, Bratislava (Slovakia), with the support of International Visegrad Fund and Open Society Foundation for Albania. Positions expressed belong to the authors and do not necessarily reflect donors’ point of view.

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## PREFACE

The regional conference “Towards regional advocacy for cooperation in the Balkans via European best practices” was organized on 20–21 March 2009 (Tirana) from Institute for Democracy and Mediation in cooperation with the Albanian Parliament, Danish Embassy and partners from Visegrad countries – Institute of Public Affairs, Warsaw (Poland), International Centre for Democratic Transition, Budapest (Hungary), EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy, Prague (Czech Republic), Slovak Foreign Policy Association, Bratislava (Slovakia).

The regional conference enabled a regional forum of consultations on the efficient instruments and European best practices of (non)institutionalized forms of regional cooperation from Visegrad, Nordic and Baltic countries. Experts from these regions have introduced their positions and discussed possible recommendations. This event gathered representatives from policy and decision making centers from Western Balkan countries such as Member of Parliaments, representatives of the diplomatic corps in Tirana, civil society experts, academia, think tanks, representatives of public institutions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Integration, Ministry of Interior), international institutions etc.

The Regional Conference was intended to lead a process of enhancing regional awareness on the importance of (non)institutionalized regional cooperation caucuses in each of the countries in the region by offering selected examples of best practices of successful cooperation from the VISEGRAD, Nordic and Baltic countries, and draw joint recommendations on incentive cooperation agendas that would further provoke informed debate in regional countries.

## CONFERENCE REPORT

**T**his publication includes findings of the research and contributions of Visegrad partners' expertise as well as other European best practices (Nordic and Baltic experience), and a summary of speeches held during the conference. In addition, it provides recommendations on how to move forward the agenda for further cooperation in the Western Balkans. IDM is very pleased to present this publication to the locals, Western Balkans, and other interested European parties.

Institute for Democracy and Mediation would like to express its gratitude to International Visegrad Fund and to Open Society Foundation for Albania (Soros Foundation) East East Program: Partnership Beyond Borders, to the Albanian Parliament and Danish Embassy, to its VISEGRAD and Western Balkan countries partners, and to all participants for their contributions to the success of this conference.

## INTRODUCTION

*Mariola Qesaraku, Institute for Democracy and Mediation*

Regional cooperation is a process that consents to various actors (governmental or not governmental) to engage in building networks of interdependence and common action in different fields ranging from security, economy, political, social, cultural spheres ect. Therefore, the nature of cooperation can be as broad as there are areas of governance and activities of actors. This process is in any region the result of the interaction between external and internal dynamics, where the former regards the outside environment/actors that facilitate and stimulate regional cooperation, whereas the latter refers to the existing willingness and ability of the regional environment/actors to identify mutual interests and convert them in common projects for the reciprocal benefit. Bearing this in mind, in the case of the Western Balkans (WB)<sup>1</sup> regional cooperation has been a process mainly driven by actors from outside the Balkans, where the most important one has been the European Union (EU). After the violent break up of the former Yugoslavia, the international community has put a lot of efforts to stabilize and develop the region, thus constantly focusing on the enhancement of regional cooperation as one of the main processes of succeeding with this critical endeavor.

In this aspect, the Stability Pact for South East Europe (SPSEE) initiated in 1999 had the main objective to foster regional cooperation in economic, political and security terms. On this regard, SPSEE provided a significant contribution by offering a forum where WB countries and International actors could identify common problems of the region and formulate strategies to deal with them. Yet, the need for more enhanced regional ownership of its own affairs on regional cooperation, in order to reflect maturity of these countries, was felt as crucial. As a result, in February 2008 it was launched the Regional Cooperation Council in light of promoting self responsibility with the main goal to stimulate regional cooperation and bring the countries of WB closer to Euro-Atlantic structures.

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<sup>1</sup> Western Balkans include Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Kosovo.

Nevertheless, regional cooperation has become a key element in the WB especially in the light of the Stabilization and Association Process launched by the European Union. One of the main requirements and prerequisites of Stabilization and Association Agreement for progress towards EU membership has been regional cooperation. EU has also made conditional economic and financial assistance to the WB, upon to their commitment to cooperate with one another. In the case of WB it can be assumed, that EU integration goes hand in hand with regional cooperation, and EU has been the main factor in stimulating regional cooperation in WB. All the WB governments are committed to EU integration, consequently EU has the leverage to foster cooperation among them. However, in order for the EU transformative power to be successful, it is indispensable that WB countries become key players and take ownership of this process.

Despite the fact that some slow progress has been made from WB countries to improve inter-regional cooperation and endorse owned initiatives, cooperation has not reached the desired level, and single country approach to EU integration has prevailed. Additionally, cooperation has not reached yet institutionalized forms at all levels ranging from the Head of States, Prime Ministers, Ministers, caucuses at each of the national Parliaments of the countries in the region, etc.

In the light of the great importance of regional cooperation for all WB countries, the Regional Conference organized by IDM intended to address key challenges of inter-regional cooperation in the WB through focusing on the instruments and promoting European best practices of (non)institutionalized regional cooperation forms - Visegrad, Nordic and Baltic countries - and challenges for the Western Balkans. More specifically, through this initiative, IDM intended to:

- To lead a process of initiating regional cooperation caucuses in each of the countries in the region;
- To offer selected examples of best practices of successful cooperation from the VISEGRAD, Nordic and Baltic countries;
- To enhance regional awareness based on jointly approved recommendations on incentive cooperation agendas that would further provoke informed debate in regional countries.

Consequently, the conference offered the best practices of cooperation from two regions comparable in a number of respects with the WB and more specifically Visegrad and Nordic regions. Similarities feature the communist past experiences, considering similar geographical proximity to Western Europe and analogous external orientations of their

political and economic elites toward EU. Countries of these regions have registered positive results, consequence of their regional cooperation, therefore lessons could be drawn by the comparison, but bearing always in mind differences with the WB.

Additionally, the experience of the Nordic cooperation was introduced as an admirable practice of cooperation although the Nordic region has great differences with the Western Balkans. However, their experience could be useful in illustrating best practices especially in the field of education, environment, economic cooperation etc.

It was important to include perspectives from different representatives from Western Balkan countries in order to better understand the challenges that these countries face on regional cooperation, how they perceive it, and also brainstorm on the best ways of adapting best practices from other regions to the Balkan reality on scenarios for future regional cooperation.

Hence, this publication includes the research studies made by experts, thus bringing best practices from their regions in order to learn both from positive but also negative experience in areas of shared values, cooperation content (cross border cooperation, Euro region, education) and institutional background (creation of institutions/caucuses/ forums which are permanent structures on regional cooperation). Additionally, recommendations regarding regional cooperation for the WB countries, jointly drawn on the conference by distinguished participants may lay down the basis for further action in enhancing regional cooperation.

## I. OPENING REMARKS

*Sotiraq Hroni, Executive Director of IDM*

In his opening address at the Regional Conference “Towards regional advocacy for cooperation in the Balkans via European best practices” , Sotiraq Hroni the Executive Director of IDM, showed his appreciation for the support given by the Albanian Parliament, the Danish Embassy and all partners from Visegrad and Western Balkan countries. He also expressed his gratitude to International Visegrad Fund and Open Society Institute (Soros Foundation) that made possible this Regional Conference with their support.

Among other, in his opening remarks, IDM’s Executive Director explained the efforts to ensure participation also from representatives of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Baltic Council (BC) as a functional experience of cooperation, especially related to its parliamentary dimension. Mr. Hroni stressed the fact that practices of other regions, their achievements but also their failures can be very useful for the WB region, in the academic and practical level for encouraging a sustainable development of every kind of institutionalized form of regional cooperation.

The initial idea of the conference was to encourage discussion on what can work best for the region based on experiences and lessons learned from other countries now integrated in the European family. In this framework, he believes that it is a responsibility of the countries of the region, the political elite and of intellectuals to offer instruments that from within, can attempt to approximate cooperation approaches and responsibilities thus building a new Balkan identity.

Moreover, it is worth mentioning that Western Balkans is not the same as it was one decade ago. It is not a region lacking of contacts, of missing initiatives, or the region in which the “language of hate” prevails, but on the other hand it suffers from prevailing lack of trust and

willingness to cooperate. Regardless of progress made, there is a long way to success. It is obvious that regional relations and regional cooperation hardly appear as complimentary efforts to substantial political and social objectives for European integration in each of our societies.

For instance, although Albania's role in the region has been considered by internationals as moderate and constructive during the last 10 years, this has appeared to be more as doing the homework required by the US and EU rather than as a well developed political vision. There does not exist a practice of the institutions or parliament in having ad hoc structures for the promotion, encouragement and sustainable support of inter-regional cooperation in coping with regional challenges. As a matter of fact, in Balkan countries it exists political, academic and media debate on issues related to integration process into NATO and European Union but there is not so much regarding the need for more regional cooperation in the Balkans. One year ago, a group of experts from the Centre for European Policy in Brussels suggested to the European Commission the Nordic model "Passport Union" on free movement of people, the Visegrad model of cooperation or of the Baltic Republic shows that it has been very useful and effective in terms of Euro-Atlantic integration processes.

Finally, Mr Hroni referred to the main conclusion from an insight study of a group of experts of the Centre for Strategic Studies and Defense in Budapest. After studying thoroughly the main security documents and after an analysis through interviews with politicians and opinion-makers from all Western Balkan countries they arrived in the conclusion that regional relations of cooperation are guided from "No threat and No Trust" pattern behaviour. Thus, the Western Balkan countries do not feel threatened from each other anymore, however they do not trust each other for cooperation. Everything expressed in the most important official documents on Foreign Policy of the Western Balkans countries for regional cooperation are "for pleasing internationals" and consequently "indicators for regional consolidation are in the most cases external".

## WESTERN EXPERIENCES, USEFUL EXAMPLE OF REGIONAL COOPERATION

*Neritan Ceka, Deputy Speaker of the Albanian Parliament*

**T**he Deputy Speaker of the Parliament, Mr. Neritan Ceka after welcoming all the participants on behalf of the Albanian Parliament expressed the willingness of the parliament to further contribute and to be a partner in this initiative but also in future projects, for strengthening regional cooperation in the Western Balkans.

In this occasion he expressed his appreciation for such this initiative endorsed by Institute for Democracy and Mediation, its partners from Visegrad and the region, and the Danish Embassy in Albania for sharing best experiences of cooperation in the framework of integration processes. He also stated that western experiences would constitute a good example of regional cooperation and would encourage the Western Balkan countries as well in further deepening regional cooperation between each other. This activity which has involved representatives of the parliaments, the diplomatic corps and the civil society of the WB countries could constitute a new moment, in order to see and reevaluate their level of cooperation through European best practices from members of the European Union and NATO.

Our countries have embarked the irreversible journey of NATO and EU integration. In few days Albania and Croatia would be part of NATO. The other countries as part of the “Adriatic 5” are opening a new window of cooperation in the framework of integration in these structures. Although in different stages of integration, the WB countries have already decided their belonging to the EU family.

Therefore, although cooperation has progressed there is a lot of work to be done and to benefit from other European experiences. The first decade of the new millennium offers a new Balkan reality. In a general plan, it coincides with the closure of old histories of inter-

ethnic tensions and the acceptance of a new political reality in the Balkan countries which has the main goal is to become as soon as possible members of the EU, in order to tear down the frontiers, by making sure that people and goods can move freely.

In this framework, Mr. Ceka expressed his belief that contributions of the participants would come up with new ideas in the framework of a new institutionalization of regional cooperation. In this context, the parliaments of the region could in the first line to support initiatives on regional cooperation between governments and institutions in general. The Albanian Parliament is fully willing toward deepening regional cooperation and in the future would endorse concrete initiatives on this regard.

Finally, he expressed his willingness to pay a particular attention to the recommendations drawn in the conference and call the attention of the Albanian parliament on this important issue not only for Albania but for the whole region.

## **II. VISEGRAD COOPERATION: BEFORE AND AFTER ACCESSION TO EU**

*Radomír Špok, EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy*

### **1. Cooperation 1990-2004**

The idea of closer cooperation among the countries in Central Europe was formulated by trans-border meetings with dissidents from Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary and East Germany. After the fall of communist regimes a potential alliance of Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary obtained a more realistic shape. All of these countries inherited similar problems, prepared crucial steps for political and economic transformations and tried to redefine their sovereignty towards both the disintegrating Soviet Union and the Western structures (institutions).

Multilateral informal discussions were initiated by Mr. Vaclav Havel, Czechoslovak president in April 1990 which led to the signing of The Declaration on Co-operation of Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, Republic of Poland and Republic of Hungary on the Way of the European Integration. This declaration was signed on February 15, 1991, in Visegrad castle officially forming the Visegrad Three. Despite all of the problems with all three, respectively four countries successfully joined the EU in 2004 and thus achieved the main strategic goal of the declaration.

The relevant obstacles appeared quite early after the signature of the declaration. The first one is connected with the split of Czechoslovakia in 1992-1993 which focused its energy primarily on internal issues in its own country. Nonetheless the peaceful process of the Czechoslovak divorce led to the transformation of the Visegrad Three to the V4. In spite of efforts of some neighboring countries to join the club in the nineties (Slovenia, Austria) the V4 has outlived without any statutory changes since 1993.

The second obstacle also stemmed from the former Czechoslovakia and is connected with

Mr. Vaclav Klaus and Mr. Vladimir Meciar. While Mr. Klaus, the Czech prime minister deeply mistrusted the V4 co-operation and was persuaded on exceptionality of the Czech Republic, Mr. Meciar installed a half-authoritarian regime in Slovakia which significantly broke some democratic principles and led the whole country into political isolation. After the changes in government in both Slovakia (Sep 1998) and the Czech Republic (June 1998), a new space for revitalization of the V4 co-operation has appeared.

On October 21, 1998, prime ministers of the V4 countries signed the Budapest declaration in which they re-endorse the V4 co-operation proclaiming integration into NATO and the EU as the main priority. Such a promise was aimed especially at Slovakia since the remaining countries were at that time partially integrated into NATO (officially March 14, 1999) and even started the negotiations on accession into the EU (March 1998). The effort of Slovakia to catch-up to the fellow countries was further stimulated by concrete steps, e.g. assistance of the Czechs concerning the harmonization of Slovak legislation in the first years of negotiations with the EU (provision of translations, consultations, etc). During the negotiations with the EU many people expected a closer co-operation among the V4 countries, however no such relationship has materialized. The politicians were not able to define the lowest common denominator for the negotiations with the EU Commission and furthermore some sensitive internal political disputes appeared. The Czechs were offended by the statement of Mr. Viktor Orban – Hungarian prime minister on the potential revision of the Benes decrees (post-war presidential decrees regulating property rights and status of national minorities collaborating with the Nazi regime), and the Slovaks did not like the Hungarian act on rights of ethnical Hungarians living abroad (a relevant Hungarian minority live in Slovakia).

In the period of 1998 – 2004 the Visegrad co-operation clearly showed the willingness of individual states to seek some concrete platforms for joint projects and actions but results have been very limited. Nonetheless, the establishment of International Visegrad Fund (see respective chapter below), the assistance to Slovakia in the negotiation process, regular meetings at different levels and the formation of several ad hoc committees can be considered as significant progress especially when compared with the situation in previous period (1991 – 1998).

## **2. Perception of Visegrad cooperation by the citizens**

Many analysts and political scientists say that the V4 is a good label with certain potential but so far with minimum real successes. Let us have a look at the V4 cooperation from the perspective of its citizens. The last detailed research on this issue dated in 2003

comes up with the conclusions barely half of the V4 population has ever heard about the Visegrad cooperation and know what it is. Slovakia is the leading country ranking with 56% of citizens, followed by Hungary with 44% while Poland and Czech Republic are lagging behind with 39% and 35% respectively of the population.

On the other hand Poland is the country where 34% of population has never heard about V4 compared with Hungary (29%), Czech Republic (19%) and relatively well informed Slovakian public (9%). One of the factors which can determine the Slovak orientation towards the V4 group is a delay of this country with the accession to both the EU and NATO. While the other countries joined NATO in 1999, Slovakia, which had to survive the mid-nineties under the government of controversial Mr. Vladimir Meciar, received the invitation in 2003. A similar delay threatened the negotiations with the EU but thanks to successful catch-up process in Slovakia this country has joined the European Union together with their fellow V4 countries.

The second question which should be examined is the sense of V4 cooperation. Having the question "Is the cooperation among the V4 countries still important, and does it still have a mission to fulfill?" It is again in Slovakia where people trust this regional cooperation the most (75%) while the Czechs are the most indifferent (46%). Here it is necessary to mention the legacy of nineties in the Czech domestic policy led by the current Czech president Mr. Vaclav Klaus. He has never been keen on Visegrad cooperation and in his speeches he often emphasized the uniqueness of the Czech Republic, its social and industrial development and considered the Czech Republic to be *primus inter pares* when talking about the political and economic transformations and memberships in European and transatlantic structure.

Citizens find different reasons why the V4 countries should cooperate. In most of them (SK, PL, HU) an aspect of geographical position prevailed followed by common history and effort to join the EU. For the Czechs it is a common history that seems to be a main argument for mutually beneficial cooperation.

Content of V4 cooperation is the last but not least factor which the respondents were questioned. The data is quite similar for all V4 countries maybe with an exception of Hungary where 46% of citizens saw a joint effort to join the EU as the main *raison d'être* of V4 cooperation. Besides, cultural exchange, foreign policy and internal security (e.g. crime prevention, police cooperation) have been mentioned often, but there are no doubts that majority of people (65% in HU; 62% in SK) perceive the economic cooperation as the most appropriate content of cooperation.

### 3. Trade inside the V4

Have the expectations of citizens relating to the economic cooperation as the main priority of V4 cooperation been fulfilled? The first criterion for assessing this question could be the foreign trade inside V4 countries demonstrated by the data provided by the Czech Statistical Office. According to them the Czech export to the remaining V4 countries has increased by 322% (from 103 bil. CZK in 1993 to 439.5 bil. in 2007), but is still lower than the overall Czech export growth in this period (488%). This, at first glance lowers the focus on the trade inside the V4 has been to some extent caused by the existence of Czechoslovak federation and relatively intensive business links in the year when the independence of the Czech Republic and Slovakia were declared (1993).

On the other hand the trade between Czech companies and the Polish and Hungarian counterparts has incredibly boosted. While the volume of Czech export to Poland was roughly 12 bil CZK in 1993 (2% of overall Czech export) fourteen years after it exceeded 147 bil CZK (5.9%) which is more than 1,125% growth! The case of Hungary is similar with almost 800% growth of Czech export to Hungary. As for the import of goods to the Czech Republic the picture is more or less the same as the export data. Generally in both export and import criteria Slovakia and Poland are ranked second, and third place respectively, of all the trade partners (just behind Germany).

It is interesting to watch the data of mutual trade with regards to the EU accession. Between 2003 (a year before the EU membership) and 2007 the growth is enormous; the Czech export has doubled towards Slovakia and showed even higher boost in relation to Poland (by 124%) and Hungary (by 148%). Apart from the EU which has lifted all remaining barriers in mutual trade this steep growth of trade inside the V4 region was caused by relatively high economic growth of the whole Central Europe (with some reservation in the case of Hungary) especially by automotive industry which became an important cluster with many suppliers and producers benefiting from reasonable distance and good infrastructure in the trans-border regions of the V4.

Good and intensive business contacts can also be demonstrated on some concrete examples of trans-border mergers inside the V4 region. There are two areas where such enhanced cooperation is seen quite well – energy and petrol industries. (There are many more cases but the above mentioned sectors are the only ones where domestic capital and national owners prevail). The petrol business is represented by two mergers (Hungarian MOL with Slovakian Slovnaft and Polish PKN Orlen with the Czech Benzina company). In the energy sector it is especially the CEZ – Czech company producing and distributing electricity which

has purchased a couple of power plants in Poland, is now preparing to build two new natural gas power stations in Hungary and cooperates on building up a nuclear power station in Mochovce, Slovakia. It is not possible to say that such intensive business cooperation has started thanks to the V4 (more likely thanks to the EU and process of globalized capital) but in any case it contributes to better visibility of Central European countries strengthening its identity.

#### **4. Institutional structure**

Since the beginning, the Visegrad cooperation has been based on intergovernmental cooperation and individual projects without any permanent institutional structure. There is no secretariat, no official acting on behalf of the V4 group. This is the significant difference from other regional cooperation scheme, e.g. Benelux has its own General Secretariat, Nordic Council has even the Secretary General representing the whole regional group of countries.

The practical political life of Visegrad co-operation is framed by the meetings on various levels. While the regular meetings of prime ministers or presidents are the most visible many other sessions on lower levels (ministers, deputy ministers, and special envoys) take place during the year. Since 1998 several commissions and committees were established dealing with economic trans-border criminality, preparations for the Schengen treaty, international terrorism, cultural and scientific co-operation. Most of the outputs arising from these meetings were limited on ad hoc basis reflecting the topical needs.

Regardless of some political statements of V4 leaders at the various summits, there is a minimum chance to push ahead any further institutionalization of Visegrad co-operation. The only institution which has ever been established in the framework of V4 is the International Visegrad Fund.

#### **5. International Visegrad Fund (IVF)**

IVF was founded on June 9, 2000, by the decision of the governments of Slovakia, Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. The main goal of this fund is to promote closer cooperation among the V4 countries through supporting educational, scientific and cultural projects. This fund concretely supports the exchange of young people, cross-border cooperation and tourism.

The yearly budget of IVF is 5 million Euros and each member country contributes by one quarter. The governing bodies of the Fund are the Conference of Ministers of Foreign

Affairs and the Council of Ambassadors. The executive body of the Fund is composed of the Executive Director and the Deputy Executive Director. The administrative body of the Fund is the Secretariat.

The Fund provides support through four grant programs, three scholarship schemes and artist program. Among the recipients of the Fund's support are mainly non-governmental organizations, municipalities and local governments, private companies, schools and universities and individual students and artists.

The overall expenses for the above mentioned programs have increased from 406,316 EUR in 2000 to 4,066,517 EUR in 2007. The content of the support has also significantly developed; while in 2000 there was only one grant program supporting in total 26 projects. In 2007 IVF offered five schemes (small grants, standard grants, strategic grants, scholarships and artist residency) which contributed to 768 projects. The distribution to individual countries seems to be a sensitive political issue and that is why it is as equal as possible (e.g. in 2007 the biggest recipient – HU – 22.53%, the smallest recipient PL – 20.84%). In 2007 over 14% of total IVF budget was distributed for the project outside the V4 countries (Ukraine, Austria, Romania, etc.).

It is clear that the IVF has become an important donor for many organizations in the region which is one of the most visible outputs of Visegrad cooperation.

## **6. Cooperation after accession to the EU**

On May 1, 2004, the general objective of the Visegrad declaration from 1991 has been achieved when all V4 countries joined the European Union. Therefore at the prime minister meeting in Kromeriz on May 12, 2004, a new declaration was signed defining the new goals of this regional cooperation. The prime ministers agreed that further cooperation of V4 countries would have to continue inside the European Union with overall goal to strengthen the Central European region. Such cooperation should remain flexible, open without building up an institutional structure and based on concrete projects. The efforts of neighboring countries to join V4 or some particular projects (Austria, Slovenia) were also reflected in this declaration stating that V4 countries are ready to closely cooperate with their nearest partners. The only specific content of V4 cooperation which is explicitly mentioned in the declaration is a joint conviction that the European Union should remain open for further enlargement. Thus, V4 countries began to assist the countries aspiring for the EU membership, especially in Eastern and South Eastern Europe.

Eastern dimension of the EU and the Eastern partnership approved by the European council in June 2008 is really one of the areas where no particular obstacles can be found. All the V4 countries have some national interests in helping countries in Eastern and South Eastern Europe which arise either of close business links (Polish-Ukrainian border, investments in SE Europe) or ethnical minorities (Hungarians in Serbia and Croatia).

Certain cooperation among the V4 countries has been expected even before the EU accession. During the negotiations with the EU some tendencies to coordinate the positions of V4 countries have appeared but were never realized. The European Commission continuously persisted to negotiate with the candidate countries on a bilateral basis creating a strong constraint for any joint action. Mr. Jan Kohout – Czech representative in the Convention on the Future of Europe remembers that some common initiatives were produced but in the end all efforts failed. Unfortunately, the current situation five years after the EU accession has not distinctively improved. Co-operation in the European parliament and the Council has not gained any concrete shape; there are no regular consultations among the V4 countries on a joint position or voting. Furthermore the individual V4 state pragmatically creates ad-hoc coalitions with like-minded partners instead of long-term strategic partnership inside the V4. Let us try to have a look at the issues which are potentially overlapping in national priorities of the Visegrad countries.

1. National protectionism, barriers at common market – economies of all four countries are very open and heavily pro-export oriented. Therefore they are very sensitive on any mentions, heard sometimes from the Western fellow countries, on dangers of delocalization and social dumping in CEE countries. The motto of the Czech presidency “Europe without Barriers” could be easily acceptable for the whole V4.
2. Transatlantic relations, Security and NATO – all V4 countries emphasize the necessity of transatlantic relations for security not only in Europe but all over the world. Poland and Czech Republic are probably the loudest advocates of EU – US ties, and the treaties on radar and missile basements as a part of anti-missile shield are the best evidence for this argument. The Iraqi crisis and Mr. Donald Rumsfeld division of Old and New Europe also confirmed the different perspectives of Central European states to global threats.
3. Eastern partnership and further enlargement – for the whole V4 group it is a crucial point as it has been seen from the Kromeriz declaration (2004) as well as practical steps of political representations. Hungary, Slovakia and Czech Republic strongly concentrate on Western Balkan countries and support the EU enlargement (original plan of the Czech presidency counted on ending the negotiations with Croatia by June 2009). Poland promotes the development of relations with Ukraine and Belarus since it is important for

both economic and security reasons.

4. Energy policy – a indispensable policy for energy stability of the V4 especially after the gas crisis in the beginning of 2009. All these countries intensively lobby for the Nabucco gas pipeline and more funds for trans-border connections of pipeline networks which could prevent the possible drop-out in power supply. In January 2009 the citizens of V4 witnessed a nice example of V4 solidarity when the Czech Republic provided Slovakia with its natural gas reserves and Hungary declared the readiness to deliver electricity to Slovakian network if needed.
5. EU budget, EU Cohesion Policy – all V4 countries are net recipients from the EU budgets and they rely on funds from the EU Structural funds to develop their economies. This area might become a suitable platform for co-operation in the EU relating to upcoming financial perspective 2014 – 2020.

While the above mentioned issues can be considered as opportunities there are in any case the areas in which no co-operation can be expected. The first of them is the Euro – a single European currency which has been already adopted in Slovakia, Poland officially states to be ready for adoption in January 2012 while the Czech Republic hesitates to come up with a clear decision and Hungary does not fulfill any of the four main Maastricht criteria. Any consensus could be hardly found in the reform of Common Agriculture Policy (too different agricultural sectors, e.g. in CZ and PL), minority protections (sensitive issue of Hungarian minority in Slovakia) or institutional structure of the European Union itself. In the latter question the size matters and V4 countries differ significantly. Poland is ambivalent between acting as the biggest of the small countries or the smallest of the big countries (together with GE, FR, IT, UK and ES), Hungarians and Czechs are ranked among the mid-sized countries and Slovakia is even smaller. The size of the country manifests nicely in the discussions on institutional settings in the EU Commission (one country – one commissioner principle) and the Council (Qualified Majority Voting).

## 7. Conclusions

In 2004, the Visegrad co-operation achieved the original goals, i.e. accession of its members into NATO and the European Union. From this perspective the V4 can be assessed very positively. On the other hand the expectations of some politicians and citizens were a bit higher and have not been realized. The concrete co-operation froze right at the beginning and had to be revitalized in 1998. Nonetheless, even the public support of closer Visegrad co-operation is quite considerable. In the past the V4 showed no real political concessions, bargains or trade-offs inside the Visegrad partners towards the EU. A couple of practical steps must be appreciated, e.g. establishment of International Visegrad Fund, assistance

to Slovakia during the negotiations with EU and solidarity at times of energy crisis.

It seems that businessmen are again one step ahead the politicians. Macroeconomic analysis of data relating to mutual trade convincingly shows the steep boost of both export and import of goods inside the Visegrad Four. Does it mean that business is able to perceive the opportunities better than politicians do? Functioning clusters of automotive producers and their suppliers (textile, plastic industries, etc.) is a nice example of how the whole of Europe has been integrating since the fifties. Reflection of Karl Marx's politics in the superstructure of economy seems to be in this context correct.

Generally, there are only a couple of practical achievements of Visegrad co-operation and for many people it lagged far behind the expectations. On the other hand Visegrad remains a valuable label in international politics with its potential hidden itself.

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### **III. THE ROLE OF THE VISEGRAD COOPERATION IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND COORDINATION OF FOREIGN POLICIES AMONG ITS MEMBERS**

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#### **1. Visegrad sub regional cooperation as a community of values**

The experience of the formation, crisis and redefinition of the Visegrad Group as a voluntary form of sub regional integration serves to underline several lessons pertinent to questions of conflict management and dispute resolution. The Group's success in maintaining a fundamentally unified foreign policy course, culminating in the eventual accession of all four countries to Euro-Atlantic structures, confirms the significance of political resolve and consistent adherence to the declared orientation for maintaining the steady political course. The role of the Group as a community of values was demonstrated in the case of Slovakia when the Meciar administration was ostracized not only among Western politicians but also in the Central European forum. The Group's cohesion, challenged by the disintegration of Czechoslovakia, the Slovak-Hungarian conflict and differences over relations of some of its members to the largest regional powers, Germany and Russia, has been maintained, and the constellation remains one of the few recognizable and lasting subregional initiatives in the region.

The effectiveness of the Group in containing conflicts is rarely remembered, probably as it relied on the 'soft' instruments, typical of a club or association, rather than elements of direct pressure on one of its members. The initiative is unique in the East European region in its origin as a voluntary group of states, which unilaterally stated their common aspirations to re-integrate with the Western European structures at the time when the West was still uncertain as to the feasibility of this undertaking. The fact that the initiative came from the states of the region themselves, and was not a project imposed from outside, had an important aspect of building the image and reinforcing own commitment by referring to

certain self-adopted standards. In a way, the Visegrad experience served as an ‘ante-room’ of NATO and the EU, socializing the members in practicing the discourse of self-restraint, compromise and pursuit of own interests within the bounds of common welfare. When viewed in this context, the ‘peaceful divorce’ between the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the bumpy but eventually resolved issue of the rights of minorities between Slovakia and Hungary and the gradual warming up of relations and adoption of common stance in key security and foreign policy issues between the former rivals, Warsaw and Prague, must be seen as successes, which could only be possible within the larger sub regional framework.

The low level of institutionalization and emphasis on values in foreign policy were signs of deliberate abandonment of the principles of real politik, spheres of influence and forced subordination of national interests to supranational structures, reminiscent of the Cold War divisions and the Warsaw Pact/Comecon political and economic deep integration. From the perspective of the time, it is astounding that the states, which had just regained independence and enjoyed individual choice in foreign policies, were willing to declare common foreign policy course as early as in 1991. Two factors may be credited with this willingness. The first was the shared heritage and worldview of the ruling elites—the governments in Budapest, Prague and Warsaw all had roots in the dissident pro-democracy movements of the 1970s and 1980s, which declared the primacy of human rights (including minority rights), rescinded the use of force in international relations and had strong mandates for democratizing reforms. The second was paradoxically the uncertainty of the international environment—a ‘power vacuum’ emerged with the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Central Europe, and the new continental order was still unsettled with the Central European states apprehensive of the consequence of the reunification of Germany on the one hand and the disintegration of Yugoslavia on the other. Thus, the elites of the region were brought closer together both by the commonly shared ideals and visions of politics and by the perception of looming threats in the international scene.

It may be asked why the Central European sub regional initiative was not replicated in the other parts of the post-Communist world (with the exception of the Baltic states)—in particular, the CIS and the Western Balkans. A crucial factor was the intellectual debate preceding the systemic transition—Kundera, Konrad and Michnik ‘rediscovered’ the common Central European identity and historical heritage by reinterpreting the national histories so that the narrow nationalist discourses were largely abandoned in favor of the more inclusive concepts of ‘civil society’, ‘self-government’ and multinational federalism (especially in the Polish context). The ‘Central European idea’ was far more than an antiquarian intellectual exercise in which the medieval unity of the region overshadowed the conflicts of the modern

era—in the hands of the democratic opposition to authoritarianism it became a foundation of a new political environment, which valued and strengthened the local cross-border ties, acknowledged the position of minorities and reestablished the status of several regions as multiethnic communities. To the first-generation Central European democratic governments, the axioms of permanence of state borders in Europe, guarantees of ethnic minority rights and the preference for voluntary association as a form of integration, were significant in themselves as radical departures from the nationalist slogans of the Communist leaders and important safeguards against the traumatic experience of the WWII-period ethnic cleansing, resettlement and redrawing of the borders (again, most poignant in Poland).

Analysts often pointed to the lack of political interest on the part of the elites and the revival of exclusive nationalist identities as main barriers to lasting sub regional integration in the CIS and the Western Balkans. However, an element that has been present since the beginning of the 1990s in the Visegrad sub region and has been missing in the other two sub regions was the consensus on the shared values and a joint resolve to adopt a single geopolitical orientation, both of which transcended the individual interests and mutual animosities. Of course, it should also be noted that among the members of the group there is no country, which would attempt to lead the integration efforts by subordinating the interests of the other partners—in fact, it is notable that even Polish politicians acknowledge that the oft-used term “regional leader” represents only Poland’s ambition to generate enough interest among the other members of the group so that they would rally behind Warsaw on specific items of the agenda. The Visegrad Group represents a compromise—the individual states of the group are not powerful enough to play the role of regional powers, and at the same time the open character of the cooperation, lacking coordination mechanisms, and largely limited to issuing declaratory statements, allows the states to differ in the issues with genuine conflicts of interest.

## **2. Limitations of the model**

Siedschlag (2001) points to interplay between the dynamics of EU and NATO accession and the willingness of Central European states to institutionalize their cooperation within the Visegrad Group. The constellation initially served its purpose of creating a common identity, setting the three (and soon, four) countries apart from the more unstable and unpredictable area of the CIS, and adding credentials to the declared course of Euro Atlantic integration. However, by mid-1990s the success of the enterprise, evident in the adoption of the term ‘Visegrad states’ in the diplomatic parlance, was generally taken for granted as the individual member states of the Group began pursuing unilateral strategies for accession into the EU.

The original rationale for forming a sub regional group that of establishing an acknowledged community of stability, unified in its pro-Western course ceased to motivate the members for collective action by the late 1990s. The four countries could not agree its foreign policy activities in two fundamental areas: the strategy of accession to the EU and the priorities in relations with countries of CIS – primarily Russia and Ukraine. These divisions partly reflected genuine differences of national interests and domestic priorities, and partly were influenced by the external pressures limiting the policy options of respective countries.

As Wyciszkievicz argues in his overview (2003) of the policies of the Visegrad states towards Ukraine, the cooperation within the Group did not override or even weaken the fundamental disparities in the countries' foreign-policy interests and strategies. The limited impact of the regional process on the member countries' policy decisions became most visible in the period between the accession to NATO (1999) and EU (2004). The differentiated approach to candidates for accession into those two organizations, which was demonstrated in the exclusion of Slovakia from the first wave of NATO accession and the temporary division of EU candidates into two groups, was a powerful incentive for competition among the countries of the region for playing the role of a 'leader' in the transition and accession processes.

The EU accession process served to reveal rifts among the countries, creating in the capitals of the states a perception that the sub regional cooperation might be actually a liability rather than an asset for realizing vital national interests. This can be illustrated by comparing the Czech and Polish foreign policy priorities, which clashed in the run-up to EU accession—for different reasons, both countries felt that reaching consensus within the group was unrealistic or even counterproductive. The Czech Republic opposed further institutionalization of the sub regional cooperation as it was interested in joining the EU as fast as possible, even if that meant leaving one or two of the members of the group temporarily behind. In turn, the Polish approach stressed the importance of maintaining good-neighborly relations with Ukraine, which had by then achieved the position of a 'strategic partner' in Eastern Europe for Poland. Behind these two approaches lay the two different philosophies of 'Westernization'—if for the Czech Republic, stressing the distance from the rest of Eastern Europe was vital for securing its national interest of anchoring the country in Western structures, for Poland, the development of model relations with the countries in direct eastern neighborhood was seen as a confirmation of Warsaw's status as a regional leader.

Questions arose over the added value of the Visegrad cooperation once the participating

states acceded to the EU (Bukalska 2004, Krosiak 2007, Rusnak 2004). It was asked, for instance, whether the Group was not obsolescent as a forum of consultation given the fact that the governments could rely on the established and much stronger coordination mechanisms in the EU. Also it was questioned whether the V4 states needed to stress its unique configuration after becoming part of the larger community of liberal democracies. The Ukrainian electoral crisis and Orange Revolution of 2004 made it clear, however, that the emphasis on values and the idea of solidarity with pro-democracy movements, shared by the V4 states, remained distinctive elements of the Visegrad identity. The configuration remained attractive not so much as an institutional setup as an example of successful democratic transformation for the other parts of the post-Communist world. At the same time, the experience of subsequent years calls for the reassessment of the often-accepted maxim of the Visegrad cooperation as a model for other sub regions in Eastern Europe.

### **3. Lessons for other subregions**

As noted above, the Group has been an unquestioned success in the realization of its primary objective, that of reinforcing the credentials of its members as aspiring members of the club of Western liberal democracies. The term “Central Europe” synonymous with the rule of law, political and economic stability, respect for minority rights and peaceful resolution of conflicts gained such currency that by now it helps disguise the diversity among its members in their economies and political systems as well as downplay the persisting interstate conflicts. The current economic crisis is actually the first occasion on which, for instance, the Polish or Slovak governments chose to distance themselves from, for instance, Hungary, undergoing severe fiscal problems, preferring to portray themselves as ‘islands of stability’.

Secondly, unlike the sub regional initiatives in the Western Balkans (initiated externally, see Mu 2008) and the CIS (promoted by an unquestioned regional leader, Russia), the Group by design has lacked an ‘integrating centre’. Its integration model could be described as a narrow consensus limited to issues where the states either had shared interests or held few reservations. The Group steered away from ambitious projects and over the years has remained a high-level consultation forum, which occasionally issued joint declarations on issues of common interest. This approach paradoxically ensured the Group’s survival for nearly two decades now—the constellation did not derail on any single issue and remains as recognizable in the radically different environment of the late first decade of the twenty-first century as it was in the beginning of the 1990s.

Such low level of institutionalization may be sustained for three reasons. Firstly, the mission

of the Group embodies deep elite consensus on the principles of interaction between states and respect for human rights (including minority rights), which serves as the yardstick against which the performance of individual governments may be measured (as in the case of the Meciar administration). Secondly, the institutional framework for dispute resolution is found in the international forums, to which all the member states belong—the Council of Europe, NATO and the EU. Thirdly, the Group has stable membership and the mere fact of the continued functioning of the configuration adds to its symbolic capital—in other words, the member states have realized some of the benefits of cooperation, and take advantage of the value of this reputation for stability and anchoring in the Euro Atlantic institutions not only as individual states but as a sub region as well. However, it may be asked whether the Visegrad Group would have survived without stronger coordination mechanisms if it was not for the eventual integration into NATO and the EU. While the Group was not established by the West, the promise of entry into the club of Western democracies exerted primary influence over the foreign policy courses of the individual Visegrad states, especially in the run-up to NATO and EU accession. In fact, the states of the Group could be much more interested in closer integration in selected areas, where the EU is not ready to step in as a whole yet. Some initiatives appeared already, such as solidarity in energy policy (advocated by Poland) or common approach to promoting democracy in Ukraine. At the same time, while the V4 remains a recognizable bloc, it is unlikely that the differences in foreign policy strategies, which remain considerable, are going to be bridged any time soon. Hence, ‘coalitions of the willing’ (as that of Poland and Lithuania or Hungary and Slovenia) are certainly going to be necessary preconditions for effective lobbying for a given issue at the V4 forum.

As a result, the utility of the Visegrad model of cooperation is limited for other subregions in the post-Communist world. Firstly, it presupposes the genuine commitment to a single geopolitical orientation and pre-existing fundamental consensus on the principles of state coexistence. This capital of domestic political culture was not available in the other subregions at the time. Secondly, the Visegrad ‘label’ was quickly accepted by Western states and institutions, so that the V4 countries soon received the benefits of cooperation in the form of reputation as stable democracies and prospective members of the Euroatlantic community. In contrast, over time it became evident that the reaction of the West to the disintegration of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia was inadequate, and by the end of the 1990s it provoked strong disappointment among the few intellectuals and politicians who had hoped for the Western assistance to democratic regimes at the beginning of the 1990s. Finally, an important difference between the Visegrad states and the successor states to the USSR and Yugoslavia was the consolidated national identity (at least in

Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary) and existing state structures of the Visegrad countries, which served as the necessary institutional framework for cooperation.

At the same time, the low level of institutionalization and emphasis on shared values has helped establish a community, which may become attractive to some states in the other sub regions once they also take advantage of the stability attributed to the prospects of accession to NATO and the EU. If one were to think of a possible scenario for the Western Balkans, the 'Visegrad' model could be applied as a form of trust-building among states, which are resolved to pursue the same accession path, and are willing to demonstrate their solidarity in selected issues of common interest. While this form of voluntary sub regional community-formation lacks own strong enforcement mechanisms, it may provide a component that is much needed to provide impetus for accession—creating a new identity and establishing the norms, characteristic of a security community of liberal democracies.

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## IV. VISEGRAD COOPERATION: LESSONS LEARNED AND THE WAY FORWARD

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Despite, or rather thanks to the ongoing global crisis, and the growing recognition that global trans-national challenges require wide coalitions, there is historic momentum toward cooperation in and among our regions, in Europe, and globally as well. To be effective, cooperation has to be framed by common interests and focused on concrete issues to deliver results. This paper is an attempt to apply this simple statement to the history and achievements of Visegrad cooperation. Besides the immediate objective at hand, documenting this story is also an expressed objective of the International Centre for Democratic Transition (ICDT), a non-profit democracy assistance NGO based in Budapest, Hungary which collects the experiences of recent democratic transitions and shares them with those who are determined to follow that same path. Instead of promoting democracy in general, the ICDT sets more concrete and pragmatic goals. One of the Centre's program areas is "Interregional Cooperation", i.e. promoting interregional cooperation between governments and civil societies of neighboring countries to enable democratic transition. An ongoing program titled "Transferring the Experiences of Visegrad Cooperation to the Western Balkans and the GUAM Countries", a 2 year flagship project also has a similar aim. ICDT launched this project because there are important similarities between the situation of the Visegrád countries in the not-so-distant past and that of the countries of the Western Balkans today.

*"Since 1991 the close cooperation of the core Central European countries has been a cornerstone for stability in the post-Cold War period Europe. It can and it should serve as a model for other groups of states with strong historical and geographic connections."*

*H.E. Mr. Géza Jeszenszky, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Hungary*

The Visegrád Group was formed in part to pursue the same strategic goal of integration

into Euro-Atlantic structures that now figures at the top of the foreign policy agendas of Western Balkan countries. In the case of the Western Balkans, the articulation of such a dimension to serve as a framework for strengthening regional cooperation is even more important than it was for Central Europe. First, it is an explicit condition for advancing towards EU integration. But even more importantly, regional cooperation also sends the implicit signal that the consolidation of Western Balkan democracies permits them to transcend old divisions to work towards a new, common goal. That is why we believe it matters that consistent efforts take place to study and apply the lessons of V4 cooperation in the Western Balkans. At the same time, contributing to the stability of the region is an important issue for Hungary and its Visegrad partners, and it makes sense to use the V4 framework in this regard. Specifically, the paper tackles the issue in three parts:

- It briefly sketches the history of Visegrad cooperation (something that as a Hungarian one also feels compelled to do);
- It offers an analysis of some of the "lessons learned", which may actually be too ambitious an expression: collection of experiences is perhaps more appropriate as these experiences need time and historical perspective to mature and be instilled into real "lessons learned";
- It offers some thoughts on the way forward in utilizing the potential of the Visegrad format, especially as applied to the specific themes and topics discussed at the conference.

## **2. V4 HISTORY**

Originally, Visegrad cooperation was born at a royal summit of the kings of Poland, Bohemia and Hungary in the Hungarian castle of Visegrad on the Danube in 1335. In the early 1990's, it was not clear to anyone, not even in West, what the New Europe would look like. It was a common interest though to ensure that a democratic society was firmly established not only in the individual countries concerned but in those of the neighbors as well. Also, new cooperation was made easier by years of personal contacts between dissident movements and despite many historic differences, the three founding Central European countries were all post-communist states closest to each other in wider Europe in terms of historical and cultural ties, level of economic and social development, way of thinking founded on many a shared historic turbulence (that famous if somewhat abstract spirit of "Central Europe"), and opposition to the Soviet system. This was then the foundation reflected in the Visegrad declaration of 1991 that called for full restitution of state independence, democracy and freedom, and Euro-Atlantic integration. The fields of cooperation selected were rapprochement with European institutions, economic cooperation, infrastructure

development, free flow of information, civil society's cooperation and people-to-people contacts.

At same time, the participating states made it clear that they were not aiming to create a new bloc per se, if only because many in West were proposing Central European cooperation as a substitute for structural integration into Western Europe. This is the early, inherent contradiction of V4 cooperation that is still with us today. Still, the fact that three (later to become four and Visegrad Group with the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland, and the Slovak Republic) Central European countries were able to demonstrate an aptitude for multi-tiered cooperation was one of the main factors that led to their being the first post-communist states to join the process of European integration. According to Jirí Dienstbier, former Czechoslovak Minister of Foreign Affairs, "The United States and the European Community saw in our activities an assurance that there would be stability in Central Europe, and a gradual widening of the zone of democracy and freedom to the East. (...) Today the issues are different than 15 years ago, but the cooperation of Visegrad countries continues to be a guarantee of regional stability."<sup>1</sup> Today, European Commission President reflects on the origins and added value of Visegrad cooperation in the following way: "From the start, the aim of the group's founding members was to strengthen stability in Central Europe. By successfully meeting the challenges of this cooperation, the Visegrad Group members helped equip themselves and each other with the attributes necessary for successful integration into the European Union. Even today, the Visegrad Group see themselves as completing and reinforcing the work of existing structures in Europe, both at the EU and transatlantic level."<sup>2</sup> So, what exactly is Visegrad Cooperation?

## 2.1 Structure and development of V4

The Prime Ministers' Summit in Bratislava on 14 May 1999 approved the following contents of Visegrád cooperation<sup>3</sup>:

### *2.1.1 Substantive elements of the co-operation:*

Foreign affairs:

- Consultations and issuing, as and when the need arises, of joint statements on issues of common interest, regular meetings of V4 ambassadors;
- Regular meetings and consultations of experts (on bi-, tri-, or quadrilateral basis):

1 Dienstbier, Jirí: Visegrad - The First Phase, [www.visegradgroup.eu/ essays & articles](http://www.visegradgroup.eu/essays%20&%20articles)

2 Barroso, José Manuel: Is Visegrad Regional Cooperation Useful for the European Union? [www.visegradgroup.eu/ essays & articles](http://www.visegradgroup.eu/essays%20&%20articles)

3 <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/main.php?folderID=941&articleID=3937&ctag=articlist&iid=1>

exchange of information on long-term strategies and concepts of foreign, security and defense policy, exchange of views on the stability and security of the Central and Eastern European region,

- o exchange of information and consultation on particular regional crises,
- o transfer of experience on the preparation for NATO membership and on the NATO accession process, possible areas and forms of co-operation to support Slovakia's ambitions for accession,
- o transfer of experience on the theme of the communication strategy and methods relating to NATO and EU (PR aimed at the public at large),
- o transfer, on a mutual basis, of experience on EU integration (exchange of experience and information on positions in preparing for accession negotiations and implementation of acquis, consultations on securing of the Pre-accession funds / SAPARD, ISPA, etc./).

Internal affairs (co-operation in border and immigration affairs in the context of EU accession (consultations on the Schengen agreement and related issues, harmonisation in combating illegal migration, illicit drugs transport and distribution, weapon smuggling, organised crime and terrorism (exchange of views in process of preparation of legislation in this area);

Education, culture, society, youth and sport; Science and technology; Environment; Infrastructure (for example, exchange of information on long-term infrastructure strategies and projects, discussions on and co-operation in diversification of energy supplies);

Cross-border co-operation (for example, use of Pre-Accession Funds, information and recommendations for joint participation in the EU programmes, participation in and creation of horizontal community programmes, use of PHARE projects in the case of cross-border programmes, exchange of experience, drafting of joint studies).

## 2.2 The structure of the Visegrád intergovernmental co-operation:

- Prime Ministers' meetings with a coordinating chairmanship on a rotating basis (in the order Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia), mandate for one year, once a year an official meeting in the chairing country, once a year an unofficial meeting. The main topics to be covered were listed as state of the co-operation, EU accession talks, and strategic questions facing Central Europe;
- Meetings of other Government members as and when the need arises on particular questions in charge of corresponding ministries;
- Meetings of State Secretaries of Foreign Affairs twice a year on preparation of prime

ministers' meetings, working out draft recommendations for the tactic and strategy to be pursued in the co-operation;

- Regular Ambassadors' meetings - format 4x3 + authorities of the hosting country, and in the chairing country at least 4 times a year on state of Visegrád co-operation;
- Meetings of Visegrád coordinators twice a year, as and when the need arises, alternately in the four countries, on reviewing and co-ordinating the co-operation, preparation of the state secretaries' and prime ministers' meetings.

Furthermore, it was foreseen that "the Visegrád co-operation will not develop only between the governments, but also other forms of co-operation will be encouraged, such as the meetings of the heads of state, the regular communication between the parliaments, the intensive contacts between "intermediary bodies" of civil society, etc."

### **3. International Visegrad Fund**

From the declaration above, it becomes clear that Visegrad is not an institutionalized form of regional cooperation per se, with no standing institution. The exception as the only integrated V4 institution is the International Visegrad Fund: an international organization based in Bratislava, founded by the governments of the countries of the V4 on June 9, 2000. The purpose of the Fund is to promote development of 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 (EUR 5 million since 2007) consists of equal contributions from the governments of V4 countries. The Fund provides support through four grant programs, three scholarship schemes and artist residencies. Among the recipients of the Fund's support are mainly non-governmental organizations, municipalities and local governments, schools and universities, but also private companies and individual citizens. The governing bodies of the Fund are the Conference of Ministers of Foreign Affairs and the Council of Ambassadors. The executive body of the Fund is composed of the Executive Director and the Deputy Executive Director. The administrative body of the Fund is the Secretariat.<sup>4</sup>

### **4. Guidelines on the future areas of Visegrad co-operation**

Following EU accession, one of the main purposes of cooperation, to advance together toward Euro-Atlantic integration, was completed. This had a fundamental impact on V4 cooperation and demanded a reappraisal of the purposes of cooperation. According to the Declaration in Krom ěž on 12 May 2004, future cooperation would be developed particularly in the following areas:

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<sup>4</sup> [www.visegradfund.org](http://www.visegradfund.org)

#### 4.1 Co-operation within the V4 area:

- Culture;
- Education, youth exchange, science;
- Continuation of the strengthening of the civic dimension of the Visegrad co-operation within the International Visegrad Fund and its structures;
- Cross-border co-operation;
- Infrastructure;
- Environment;
- Fight against terrorism, organized crime and illegal migration;
- Schengen co-operation;
- Disaster management;
- Exchange of views on possible co-operation in the field of labor and social policy;
- Exchange of experiences on foreign development assistance policy;
- Defense and arms industries.

#### 4.2 Co-operation within the EU:

- Consultations and co-operation on current issues of common interest;
- Active contribution to the development of the CFSP, including the “Wider Europe – Neighborhood” policy and the EU strategy towards Western Balkans;
- Consultations, co-operation and exchange of experience in the area of Justice and Home Affairs, Schengen co-operation, including protection and management of the EU external borders;
- Creating new possibilities and forms of economic co-operation within the European Economic Area;
- Consultations on national preparations for joining the EMU;
- Active participation in the development of the ESDP, as a contribution to the strengthening of relations between the EU and NATO and deepening of substantive dialogue between both organizations.

#### 4.3 Co-operation with other partners:

- Co-operation with interested Central European countries;
- Co-operation with EU and NATO candidate and aspiring countries in support of reforms essential for their European and Euro Atlantic perspective;
- Collaboration in effective implementation of programmes of co-operation of these countries with the EU and NATO;
- Co-operation with other regional structures;
- Collaboration with other interested countries and organisations.

#### 4.4 Co-operation within NATO and other international organisations:

- Consultations and co-operation in the framework of NATO and on its defense capabilities;
- Commitment to strengthening of transatlantic solidarity and cohesion;
- Co-operation on the basis of the V4 experience to promote a common understanding of security among the countries aspiring to European and Euro Atlantic institutions;
- Enhanced co-operation within the international community in the fields of new security challenges, with a special emphasis on combating international terrorism;
- Consultation and co-operation within the OSCE on issues of common concern for V4 countries; possible joint initiatives;
- Consultation, co-operation and exchange of information in international organisations (UN, Council of Europe, OECD, etc.); consideration of possible joint initiatives,
- Possible mutual support of candidacies in international organizations and bodies.

#### 4.5 Mechanisms of co-operation

Governmental co-operation:

- Rotating one-year presidency, each chairmanship prepares its own presidency programme ensuring, among others, continuity of a long-term V4 co-operation;
- One official Prime Ministers summit a year at the end of each presidency;
- Occasional informal meetings of Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers before international events;
- Deputy foreign ministers meetings preceding the PM official summits;
- Meetings of other ministers in V4 and V4+ format;
- Intensified communication of V4 national co-coordinators and their key role in internal and inter-state co-ordination;
- Consultation and co-operation of Permanent Representations to the EU and NATO in Brussels, as well as in all relevant fora (OSCE, UN, CoE, OECD, WTO, etc.).
- International Visegrad Fund and its structures.
- Meetings of Presidents of V4 countries;
- Co-operation of Parliaments of V4 countries.

#### 4.6 Joint Statement of Prime Ministers, Warsaw, November 2008:

This meeting is an example of the wide-ranging interests and activity of Visegrad Group, with a variety of economic and international political issues on the agenda:

- The Prime Ministers will consider the proposal of the Slovak Republic to establish Visegrad Development Bank to stimulate the regional cooperation in strategic projects

financing (i.e. in energy sector);

- The Prime Ministers consider important that the particular energy supply security situation of the Central and Eastern European Member States should be reflected within the second Energy Strategy Review as well as in the second Energy Policy Action Plan;
- the Prime Ministers declare their support for the Czech Presidency initiatives aiming at intensifying the relations with the countries of the Caspian Sea region and transit countries;
- The Prime Ministers expressed their belief that EU will accomplish the necessary balance between both--the Eastern and the Southern--dimensions of European Neighborhood Policy. The Prime Ministers expect suitable EU's financial measures, essential for an effective implementation of Eastern Partnership;
- Expressed support for Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty as well as Ukraine's pro-European policy and support for Belarus' visa regime simplification.

#### 4.7 Multilateral formats, V4+

Of particular relevance in terms of V4 cooperation with neighboring regions is the V4+ formula, that has seen the establishment of relations with such diverse partners as Japan, and cooperation with other regional structures such as the Nordic Council and Benelux Cooperation. The Regional Partnership with the participation of Austria and Slovenia led to the creation of Budapest Forum in 2005. The Forum's objective was to help the European integration of Western Balkan states, with each RP country partnering up with a Western Balkan peer to provide targeted sectorial assistance.

#### 4.8 'Ups and downs, twists and turns'

The development of Visegrad Group (VG) political cooperation took place along the interaction of two variables:

- Domestic Politics

For example, problems in establishing closer cooperation were caused by two politicians, Czech PM Vaclav Klaus, a skeptic of VG and controversial Slovak PM Vladimir Meciar, and this interlude led to a near death of Visegrad. However, in 1998 VG experienced a breakthrough, when both PMs left office and their successors were capable of restarting cooperation. In 2002, VG suffered a similar crisis following the official reopening of the case of Benes decrees by Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán.

- International Context

A further wave of skepticism following the waves of 1999 NATO/2004 EU enlargement and the completion of the original "raison d'être" of Visegrad cooperation emerged: will central Europe survive as a political idea or will it be limited to cultural nostalgia? The year 2004

was not only a period in which the integration ambitions of the visegrad countries reached a peak, but it was also, in metaphorical terms, a year of growing visegrad skepticism. The reasons for this doubt lie in fears that visegrad cooperation would become irrelevant with the entry of these countries to the EU and the completion of their main mission, as well as fears that visegrad would disintegrate within the more heterogeneous environs of the EU. Still, Visegrad cooperation persisted as a reference point in Central Europe: “Visegrad is integrally linked to the term Central Europe. While other institutions and initiatives were founded in this region after 1989 and bearing some variation of the label “Central Europe”, Visegrad was exceptional. While the Central European Initiative (CEI) now numbers 17 member countries, including Italy, Albania and Belarus, and the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) has Romania and Bulgaria as active members, the number of states participating in Visegrad cooperation - apart from following the breakup of Czechoslovakia - has not changed. The Visegrad Group - the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia - actually forms a common base for CEI and CEFTA, along with other regional initiatives.”<sup>5</sup> Rather, integration with NATO and the EU required that the Visegrad countries define new goals. It remains a desirable goal for the term Central Europe to be a synonym for progressive ideas that could turn heads in Brussels and in some of the older member countries.

## 5. BALANCE SHEET

Why is regional cooperation important? In a wider sense, in diplomacy, form is also important not just substance. Habits and informal channels built as a result of regular cooperation are useful in times of crisis as a mitigating factor. “Regional cooperation is at its very foundations halfway between domestic and foreign policy. Only strong, well established societies could afford to keep solidarity and make commitments in seeking higher benefit from wider cooperation in non-zero sum game of regional cooperation. Visegrad is an attractive label in international relations mainly because of the potential hidden in the process itself.”<sup>6</sup> As we have seen, in the great best practice of regional cooperation that is the EU or NATO, V4 is an important mosaic.

Cooperation is therefore important; however, a fundamental but none the less true factor is that it is determined by political will. In turn, political will is shaped by certain structural factors.

### 5.1 Factors reinforcing Visegrad cooperation:

- Groups of countries have larger potential to influence decision-making than individual

5 Duleba, Alexander, Tomáš Strážay: New Chances, New Challenges, [www.visegradgroup.eu/ essays & articles](http://www.visegradgroup.eu/essays&articles)

6 Urban Rusnák: Is There Any Future For Visegrad Cooperation Within The EU? [www.europeum.org/doc/arch\\_eur/EPF\\_future\\_of\\_Visegrad.pdf](http://www.europeum.org/doc/arch_eur/EPF_future_of_Visegrad.pdf)

states;

- The V4 countries have – broadly speaking – a similar geopolitical position;
- the Visegrad Group may develop common policies regarding the European Neighborhood Policy and towards Russia;
- The V4 countries – except perhaps the Czech Republic -- have special interest in diversifying their energy supplies; a North-South gas pipeline might contribute to such an effort (LNG from the Adriatic and Norwegian gas from the North though the latter supplies are running out);
- 'Interreg' cooperation's are promising forms of overcoming ethnic suspicions and sensitivities;
- Certain power centers (especially the U.S.) encourage V4 cooperation for geopolitical and geo-strategic purposes;
- Schengen: the Visegrad Group should have a close cooperation in border security related issues (as three of them are so-called external border countries);
- Joint expeditionary capabilities may be developed/strengthened (e.g. existing Czech-Slovak battle groups in the EU);
- Common policies regarding raw material security may be explored;
- Environmental protection;
- Civil society cooperation;
- Cultural cooperation;
- Strengthening the only existing Visegrad Group institution, the International Visegrad Fund (current annual budget is 5 million €).

## 5.2 Factors mitigating against closer cooperation among the Visegrad countries:

- Foreign policy strategies may not mesh:
- Poland is thought to try to play the role of a regional power and the others are not willing to support this goal; Warsaw is much more concerned with security issues in the Baltic, Belarus and Ukraine than the others; Poland has taken a much stronger interest in the political outcome in Ukraine and Belarus than the others; Poland is more worried about a potential German-Russian cooperation over the head of the V4 than its partners;
- The Czech Republic does not seem to be so keen on the V4 cooperation than the others because substantial segments of the Czech political life thinks the V4 is more a liability than an asset; Prague currently is much more Eurosceptic than the others;
- Slovakia and Hungary have serious conflicts regarding the treatment of the Hungarian minority in Hungary; Pozsony (Bratislava) tends to be more understanding concerning Russian policies in Central Europe than, e.g., Warsaw;
- Hungary's policies in Central Europe are partly dictated by the presence of Hungarian

minorities in a number of neighboring countries, therefore, Budapest's interests seem to be strong in the Western Balkans and in Southeast Europe – areas, which are generally not priorities for the other V4 states; Budapest has already experimented with a promising East-West cooperation in the form of the Little Danube cooperation (Baden-Württemberg-Bavaria-Austria-Hungary); another potentially promising strategic dimension for Hungary would be a Southwest orientation (Croatia-Slovenia-Italy); the other V4 members have not taken a strong interest in both of the latter initiatives;

- There are fears that a strong V4 cooperation would reinforce the perception of these countries as EU periphery, while the national strategies aim at belonging to the core;
- The economies are not really complementary: except for the Czech Republic the others are still relatively strong in agriculture (remember, e.g. the Polish-Hungarian conflicts over Hungarian food export to Poland a few years ago);
- One potential source of friction is still the question of the Benes Decrees between Hungary on one hand and the Czech Republic and Slovakia on the other one (though this issue is currently in the backburner).

## 6. Some lessons learned and best practices

According to Urban Rusnak, former executive director of the IVF, the following conclusions can be drawn from VG history:<sup>7</sup>

- The simple truth is that the identification of the appropriate content for cooperation is a crucial first step;
- All the more so, as too high expectations raised can harm common interests if tangible results are then not delivered;
- Common goals must be tailored to existing mechanisms and vice versa. As perhaps the single most important Visegrad "best practice", the IVF was successful as a flagship of Visegrad because the appropriate legal framework was created, sufficient administrative capacity invested in, a regular financial flow assured and, perhaps just as crucial, operations were channeled to fields relatively independent of political debate;
- Solidarity is not a given, all should create and cultivate it: when any of the countries asks for joint V4 support for particularly sensitive question, partners evaluate such proposals exclusively in light of their interest, nothing like broad trade-off mechanism exists in V4;
- For working solidarity and for solidarity to work, mutual trust and well identified clear goals are among first conditions;
- Confidence building should start with technical issues with immediate impact, which is **necessary for cumulative growth of positive experiences**. Public support is a function of

<sup>7</sup> Urban Rusnák: Is There Any Future For Visegrad Cooperation Within The EU? [www.europeum.org/doc/arch\\_eur/EPF\\_future\\_of\\_Visegrad.pdf](http://www.europeum.org/doc/arch_eur/EPF_future_of_Visegrad.pdf)

- real efforts, not of empty declarations;
- Sharing Euro-Atlantic integration experience was also a particularly successful example of cooperation best practices: for example, in the case of Slovak preparation for NATO accession sharing Hungarian expertise had an important value added
- The V4 could not in the short run could not deal with highly politicized questions.

## **7. LOOKING TO THE FUTURE**

Despite the scepticism that has arisen in periods of "near death" and in the wake of the completion of Euro-Atlantic integration of the members, Visegrad has survived, and will continue to function due to a critical mass of centrifugal forces grouped along the points outlined above. In particular, the future of Visegrad can be analyzed in relation to the 3 aspects below:

1. Best practices, which in general have to do with the political will to cooperate and sectoral results and initiatives;
2. Projecting stability and promoting the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighborhood, in particular through the Regional Partnership/Budapest Forum;
3. Developing a common VG platform on democracy assistance.

Furthermore, the following points seem particularly relevant in terms of Visegrad's future:

- Effective cooperation at the regional level is an excellent way to reinforce the efficiency and proximity of action taken at the EU level. The International Visegrad Fund (IVF), with its support for cultural, scientific and educational projects, exchanges between young people, crossborder cooperation and tourism promotion, is a very good example of the regional dimension reinforcing initiatives at the European level;
- As a form of regional cooperation, Visegrad can function effectively within the EU only as long as it complements other cooperation platforms and processes for deepening European integration. At the same time, it can serve as inspiration for other models of regional cooperation in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. The unique geopolitical situation at the outset of the 1990s, when Visegrad was founded, together with the economic situation in individual countries, their cultural similarities and common past to a certain extent makes Visegrad a unique entity that cannot be reproduced in other conditions, but this is not true of select aspects of Visegrad cooperation. Apart from regular high-level political meetings, the deepening of mutual contacts at the regional level and support for cultural, especially educational projects, are all worthy of emulation. Much can also be learned from the mistakes of Visegrad, especially the period when

developments in the Visegrad Group came into conflict with undesirable domestic political developments in individual countries.<sup>8</sup>

- The countries of the West Balkans, thanks to their more clear prospects of EU membership, are closer to the Visegrad model than the states of Eastern Europe. In view of the proliferation of regional initiatives, however, the thought of founding a new form of regional cooperation as a type of “Balkan Visegrad” seems undesirable. A more practical solution would be for the most viable of the existing regional initiatives to import know-how and experiences from Visegrad through meetings or working groups. In doing so they would not only help themselves, but they would also allow the Visegrad model to be tested out. A common approach by the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia in the creation of the EU’s eastward foreign policy, and any aid they gave to the integration ambitions of the Western Balkans, could give Visegrad cooperation another lease on life.<sup>9</sup>
- In particular, the Regional Partnership Budapest forum can be a suitable format and venue to realize such an objective, with Western Balkan integration now competing for attention in Brussels with the Lisbon treaty and the economic crisis. Resuscitating cooperation to share integration experience in such a platform could help to keep the process going and serve to reassure the countries concerned and assuage fears of being left behind;

In terms of forming a V4 platform on democracy assistance, the following ideas seem particularly worthy of further consideration and high-level political attention:<sup>10</sup>

- V4 democracy assistance programmes should encourage co-operation between V4 civil society and target-country NGOs by funding projects that incorporate the participation of a V4 partner, but do not require the V4 partners to be the lead, or the participation of at least three V4 partners (as in the case of the International Visegrad Fund);
- The V4 countries should significantly improve the co-ordination of their democracy assistance programmes, and set up a joint Visegrad Democracy Fund either in individual countries or in regions, such as the Western Balkans;
- Visegrad governments should coordinate more on funding, and engage in common advocacy at the Brussels level to strengthen EU policies towards the Eastern neighbors – and the implementation of those policies;
- The role of the V4 embassies in promoting democracy should be given more prominence, and should be strengthened in future democracy assistance policies of the V4.

8 Duleba, Alexander, Tomáš Strážay: New Chances, New Challenges, [www.visegradgroup.eu/ essays & articles](http://www.visegradgroup.eu/essays%20&%20articles)

9 Duleba, Alexander, Tomáš Strážay: New Chances, New Challenges, [www.visegradgroup.eu/ essays & articles](http://www.visegradgroup.eu/essays%20&%20articles)

10 New Kids on the block: Can the Visegrad Four emerge as effective players in international democracy assistance, PASOS Policy Brief No. 2., 2008

## **8. Conclusion**

- Success depends on a clear vision, consensual goals and the appropriate mechanisms for delivery;
- Cooperation should concentrate on regional issues with practical impact for the domestic constituencies/electorate;
- Future political statements should not exaggerate the real potential of V4.

The history of Benelux and Nordic cooperation shows that we have to ready for backsliding, but efforts must be sustained for decades to bear their fruits.

## **V. STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF VISEGRAD MODEL IN THE LIGHT OF DEVELOPING REGIONAL COOPERATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS**

*Tomas Strazay, Slovak Foreign Policy Association*

**T**his article considers regional cooperation to be an important and integral part of the process of European integration. It is divided in three major parts. The first part evaluates the ability of the Visegrad cooperation to serve as an effective instrument of solving problems and fulfilling common goals of the V4 countries both in the pre-accession and post-accession periods. The second part focuses on the documents and guidelines, which are framing the activities of the Visegrad Group. Thirdly, advantages and disadvantages of the weak institutionalization of the V4 are considered.

### **1. Visegrad Cooperation as an Instrument of Meeting Common Challenges**

A short insight to the history of the Visegrad cooperation shows that the V4 became a well-established trademark both in Brussels and Washington, D.C. In the 1990s the Visegrad Four was a synonym of stability and prosperity in otherwise unstable post-communist world. Though later on the V4 had to overcome several critical moments and in the period 1993 - 1998 the Visegrad cooperation was even suspended, the achievement of the most crucial goal - the integration of all four countries to NATO and European Union - can be considered as a great success of individual countries, but also a great achievement of the Visegrad Group as a whole.

Even though the Visegrad countries have recently had certain difficulties to find a set of new priorities that would be comparable to the EU and NATO accession, it can be argued that the Visegrad cooperation still presents the most effective model of regional cooperation in Central Europe. In fact, during the negotiation process with the EU the Visegrad Group became a strategic platform for exchange of views and coordination of activities. This, however, does not mean that the V4 countries were always loyal to the interests of their

partners in the group. Even in the end of 2002, during the final phase of negotiations with the European Union each of four countries fought for its interest alone, forgetting about solidarity within the group. Similar situation repeated one year later at the Brussels Summit of the European Union. Though the membership in the EU brought the V4 additional opportunities to enhance cooperation, the V4 countries continued to have different views on couple of issues, including the Lisbon Treaty, anti-missile defense or, last but not least, the independence of Kosovo.

The diversity of views on particular issues, however, cannot overshadow the successes of the Visegrad Group both in the pre- and post-accession periods (e.g. CEFTA, Schengen, etc.). On the contrary, it highlights the importance of the V4 as a platform for exchanging views and discussing common interests. Another characteristic feature of the V4 since the very beginning is the maintenance of high flexibility on the one hand and weak institutionalization on the other. The forthcoming paragraphs of the analysis not only describe main documents framing the activities and areas of interests of the Visegrad cooperation, but their main focus is on the advantages and disadvantages of the weak level of institutionalization of the Visegrad model.

## 2. Framing Documents and Guidelines

The ability of the Visegrad Four to face effectively common challenges is to a large extent derived from the set of documents, which are framing activities of the Group and are defining the role of particular stakeholders. The Visegrad cooperation is based on quite a limited number of such documents – two general declarations, two sets of guidelines plus one supplement to these guidelines. This, however, implies that a large portion of the success of the V4 relies rather on other factors than strict rules and rigidly defined modes of conduct.

The first declaration establishing the Visegrad Group was signed by the representatives of the “Visegrad-Three” (Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland) in 1991 in Visegrád, Hungary. This declaration set up basic goals of this regional initiative and created the basis for further development of joint activities, including “the full involvement in the European economic and political system”.<sup>1</sup> After the revitalization of the cooperation in 1998, the prime ministers of the V4 countries agreed on the Contents of Visegrad cooperation, which were approved in Bratislava in 1999. The Contents included substantive elements of the cooperation in eight areas – 1. foreign affairs, 2. internal affairs, 3. education, culture, society, youth and sport,

<sup>1</sup> Declaration on Cooperation between the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Hungary in Striving for European Integration, 1991, [www.visegradgroup.eu](http://www.visegradgroup.eu).

4. science, technology, 5. environment, 6. infrastructure, and 7. cross-border cooperation.

Another important element of the Contents was the description of the structure of the Visegrad intergovernmental cooperation, as well as the involvement of other stakeholders, including parliaments and civil society organizations.<sup>2</sup> The role of the presidency of the Visegrad group was defined in the annex to the Contents.<sup>3</sup> The rotating presidency was supposed to intensify the cooperation and concentrate it on a few priority areas. Main areas of cooperation in the post-accession period were then identified in the so-called Kromeríž Declaration (2004) and attached Guidelines on the future areas of Visegrad co-operation (2004).<sup>4</sup> The latter also described more precisely the mechanisms of cooperation while mentioning specific role of meetings of presidents of V4 countries and cooperation of parliaments.

Both Visegrad declarations and sets of guidelines assign the most important role to the governments of particular countries, while presidents and parliaments are supposed to play only secondary role. Nevertheless, there exists a list of meetings of parliamentary committees of the Visegrad countries, or meetings of the presidents of the parliaments. Other parts of society, including academic institutions, cultural institutes or NGOs, are supposed to be involved in cooperation mostly through activities of the Visegrad Fund. Though there is a systematic effort to bring Visegrad closer to citizens, the V4 remains to be predominantly a political project, whose attractiveness in the population still remains limited.

### **3. Institutional Background: advantages and disadvantages of the weak institutionalization**

Declarations and sets of instructions create only necessary background for regional initiative, while its efficiency is based on the willingness of involved countries to participate equally in the cooperation, as well as on effective coordination of their standpoints and activities. Another task, however, is to evaluate what institutional background is necessary for maintaining cooperation sustainable and efficient. The Visegrad Group as such does not have any institutional background in the form of secretariat, through which the activities of the group would be managed. The only Visegrad institution remains to be the International Visegrad Fund, which is, however, to a large extent an independent entity focusing on the support of joint projects in the field of culture, education, exchange of students and scholars,

2 Contents of Visegrad cooperation, 1999, [www.visegradgroup.eu](http://www.visegradgroup.eu).

3 Annex to the Content of Visegrad Cooperation, 2002, [www.visegradgroup.eu](http://www.visegradgroup.eu).

4 Declaration of Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic on the Cooperation of the Visegrad Group countries after their accession to the European Union, Guidelines on the future areas of Visegrad co-operation, 2004, [www.visegradgroup.eu](http://www.visegradgroup.eu).

cross-border cooperation or tourist promotion.<sup>5</sup> The low level of institutionalization has both advantages and disadvantages, which can be summarized as follows:

Advantages:

- flexibility and openness to new ideas and contents
- more efficient spending of financial resources
- high importance of the principle of solidarity
- possibility to organize ad hoc meetings and coalitions with other countries

Disadvantages:

- lack of a single coordinating body
- lack of strictly defined communication procedures and mechanisms of cooperation
- decisions are not legally binding
- difficulties with building the so-called Visegrad identity.

There is a consensus in the Visegrad Group not to enlarge the group and not institutionalize it beyond the level of the International Visegrad Fund. This means that there is political will to maintain regional cooperation mostly as an informal platform for discussions on various political issues on the level of prime ministers, other government members, state secretaries of foreign affairs, ambassadors, Visegrad coordinators, presidents etc. On the other hand, the increased budget for the IVF and its support from the governments of V4 countries, steadily growing number of applications for grants, as well as rising number of awarded scholarships – also for students from non-Visegrad countries, the Western Balkans included – prove that the importance of the IVF for the V4 is crucial.

Nevertheless, the history of the Visegrad cooperation shows that regional initiative can be viable and efficient also when maintaining quite weak institutionalization. However, this assumption is valid only if there exist values, principles and informal rules, which are shared by all partners. One of the most important among them is the principle of solidarity. Despite the above mentioned divergences in positions of particular V4 countries, solidarity has remained to be the leading principle in the Visegrad Group. It also has to be underlined that the building of regional cooperation goes hand in hand with establishing a well-recognized regional “trademark”, with a positive connotation abroad. In this field the V4 may serve again as a really good example. Finally, another predisposition for a viable regional initiative remains an appropriate selection of common goals and aims, which are to be achieved.

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<sup>5</sup> The International Visegrad Fund was established in on June 9, 2000 and is based in Bratislava. The budget of the Fund (EUR 5 million since 2007) consists of equal contributions from the governments of the V4 countries. The Fund provides support through four grant programs, three scholarship schemes and artist residencies. Among the recipients of the Fund's support are mainly non-governmental organizations, municipalities and local governments, private companies, schools and universities and individual students and artists.

## VI. ROLE OF BALTIC COOPERATION TOWARDS THE REGION AND EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION

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### **1. Historical background of the Baltic Cooperation (its founding, institutions, and objectives)**

It is interesting to note that cooperation among Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania restarted at end of '80 as a reflection on most encouraging historical dates of past trilateral cooperation ("Treaty on Concord and Cooperation" signed in Geneva on September 12, 1934), and based on the presumption of agreeing on common goals and to work out a platform for mutual co-operation with the aim of regaining independence while dissolving of Soviet Union, and counting on Western support to those objectives.

Institutionalized cooperation started in May 1989 in Tallinn where the Assembly of the Baltic Independence Movements<sup>1</sup> was formed, and few months later the Baltic Council<sup>2</sup> with a broader participation of ministers, members of parliaments, academics, and activists of social movements who supported the independence of these countries. Within such contexts regular meetings took place, in which the internal political situation of three countries were discussed and analysed, a strategy to co-ordinate contacts between the Baltic republics and Western European countries was elaborated, coordination and experience was shared for their top agenda of national independence movements.

With the view to develop a joint concept concerning the economic independence of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and the minimisation of their economic dependence on the USSR on April 12 1990 Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania signed an agreement on economic co-operation; thus constituting the Baltic Co-operation Council<sup>3</sup> with the Baltic Co-operation Committee as its main executive structure consisting of three representatives from each

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1 <http://www.baltasam.org>

2 <http://www.baltasam.org>

3 <http://www.baltasam.org>

of the republics. It had committees representing various sectors and 22 working groups representing the main areas of co-operation (financial policy, industry, agriculture, etc.).

On May 4 1990 the Supreme Council of the Republic of Latvia issued an appeal to the deputies of supreme councils of two other Republics urging them to begin trilateral negotiations as soon as possible concerning conclusion of a political intergovernmental agreement and co-ordination of economic and foreign policy activities. This appeal led to the signing on 12 May 1990, of the Declaration of Unanimity and Co-operation as a renewal of the Treaty signed by the Baltic States in Geneva on 12 September 1934. The issued Declaration included a provision that a Baltic States' Council (that terminated its activities in 1993) should be set up to promote the renewal of the Baltic States' independence, international recognition of the Baltic States, harmonisation of the Baltic States' foreign policy goals, achieving withdrawal of the USSR army from their territories and defining a united position towards the USSR.

A Political Act of significant importance to attracting wider attention to the aspirations of the Baltic nations to gain independence was the meeting in Vilnius on 1 December 1990, of deputies of Supreme Councils that made an appeal to the parliaments of the world to achieve their strategic objectives of independence.

The Baltic Assembly <sup>4</sup> (BA) was established, as a consultative and coordinating body on 8 November 1991 in Tallinn with the aim of promoting cooperation between the parliaments of the Republic of Estonia, the Republic of Latvia and the Republic of Lithuania. Although decisions made by the Baltic Assembly are only advisory, they urge national parliaments and the Baltic Council of Ministers<sup>5</sup> to coordinate actions and to solve the problems on parliamentary and governmental levels. The role of such regional institutions played a key role in attaining national objectives of the three republics especially in winning independence, consolidating their institutions, integrating in NATO and European Union.

After joining the European family, Baltic cooperation institutions are continuing to play an important role facing new challenges and making efforts to strengthen democratic values and promote welfare, peace, and prosperity. In addition, the role of this regional initiative in the new international environment as well as the effectiveness of this cooperation as a possible model for other regions continues to be in the international agenda.

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4 <http://www.baltasam.org>

5 <http://www.baltasam.org>

## 2. The role of Baltic Cooperation in terms of foreign policy, economic and military cooperation between

The renewal of the Baltic cooperation at the end of '80 all the activities at various levels among the three countries can be easily commented as a strive to create a new European identity of the three republic in their efforts of independence, state building and integration in the Euro-Atlantic club, an inspiration that had encountered EC sympathy since Cold War times. Immigrants from these countries in the West had lobbied for this new identity which consequently brought to the European Parliament's declaration on 13 January 1983 that condemned Soviet occupation of the three republics and urging that EC foreign ministers "submit the issue of the Baltic states to the Decolonization Subcommittee of the UN."<sup>6</sup> This document can be regarded as the first building block for future EU–Baltic cooperation.<sup>7</sup> This regional approach to the issue by the EP was again an encouraging factor to the political cooperation process of the Baltic Republic as Cold War period was coming to an end.

The December 1990 political declaration of the three Baltic Supreme Councils<sup>8</sup> that called "USSR to give up its policy of threats and its political, economic and military pressure in relation to the Baltic countries; to immediately start intergovernmental negotiations with the Baltic countries concerning the recognition of their independence; to realize an agreement concerning the schedules of withdrawal of Soviet troops from the Baltic territories, and non-interference by these troops in Baltic affairs should be guaranteed; all obstacles preventing Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia from maintaining cross-border contacts with the other parts of the world should be eliminated"<sup>9</sup> was a remarkable event that laid the foundations of political, economic and military cooperation among countries of this regional initiative. Furthermore, it indicated the political vision for a soft transition to independent statehood by appealing to representatives of European countries and international organisations to "express their readiness to participate as third parties in Baltic–USSR negotiations"<sup>10</sup> for achieving above mentioned objectives.

In the course of past two decades the main components of cooperation in foreign policy of the Baltic Republics might be pictured as setting their new identity in the following mains aspects:

- Integration into NATO and EU and post-integration perspective of this regional cooperation perspective in the framework of Eastern EU and NATO policies,

6 East European Politics and Societies <http://eep.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/22/2/347>

7 <http://www.baltasam.org>

8 <http://www.baltasam.org>

9 <http://www.baltasam.org>

10 <http://www.baltasam.org>

- Instrumentalizing intensive partnerships with Nordic Cooperation countries to cope with challenges of reform to EU and NATO integration, security and economic cooperation through a Baltic Sea cooperation perspective,
- Eastern policy, relations with Russia,

The above three aspects of cooperation of the Baltic Republics once the independence status was achieved was not an easy process. But, it became obvious that integration and regional cooperation were important in terms of economic development and enhancing security vis-a-vis another state considered potentially threatening. On the other hand becoming EU and NATO members needed time and resources. Thus, debate existed because Baltic Republics initially believed that regional cooperation in the Baltic Sea area, might divert them from pursuing EU and NATO membership, and thereby leaving them in the grey zone between East and West. But soon they realized that engaging in regional cooperation became seen as a route to Western security organizations, and a training ground of the transition process, via which they could prove their 'acceptableness' and 'Europeanness' to the rest of Western Europe and NATO.<sup>11</sup> Precisely this second approach was ratified in Riga, on 22 April 1995 in the Resolution on Strengthening the Process of Integration into the European Union.<sup>12</sup> This Resolution considers three Nordic countries members of EU (Denmark, Sweden and Finland) as liaisons of Baltic States in relation to the European Union especially in the harmonization of the legislation and advocacy.

Right after their independence, the Baltic institutions, mainly the Baltic Assembly issued successive declaration and resolution on NATO and EU integration. In early resolution in 1994<sup>13</sup>, the BA, anxious on the security of the countries urged to their governments to develop without delay a common policy and take effective joint preparatory steps - organizational, administrative, military and political - to facilitate an early accession to NATO by all three Baltic States. While in its Declaration of April, 1997 the Baltic Assembly considered membership in the EU as one of the top priorities in the foreign policy of the Baltic States. In addition to such regional approaches to NATO and EU, the BA would also encourage or appeal to Euro-Atlantic decision makers that even a quick invitation<sup>14</sup> ("an achievement of one of the three states is an achievement of all three"); to join the NATO for any of the three countries of the Baltic Republics would be consider a joint success. Another characteristic of the Baltic cooperation in terms of foreign police and security is that in a very unique way their approach to NATO and EU accession was considered one

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11 Browning and Joenniemi : Regionality beyond Security?

12 <http://www.baltasam.org>

13 <http://www.baltasam.org>

14 <http://www.baltasam.org> Resolution on NATO Membership of the Baltic States 1997

way process, which means that there exist many resolutions that refer to the integration processes as a common one of the top foreign policy objectives.

In addressing security threats the Baltic Assembly appealed in 1994 to the Assembly of the Western European Union to consider the Baltic countries as its collective partner in military co-operation. In December 1995 Baltic Assembly expressed full support for the efforts made by the governments and their subordinated structures in coordinating joint defense and security activities manifested in the formation of joint military unit BALTBAT.<sup>15</sup> But the BA asked for additional improving co-operation in security and defense matters by extending the co-operation to cover air surveillance, sea border control, land forces and their weapons, communications systems, etc., including the formation of joint Baltic structures for coordinating the activities of the national defense forces, and report to the Baltic Assembly on the progress concerning the preparation of a defense agreement of the Baltic States.

The formation of Baltic Peacekeeping Battalion (BALTBAT) and the other important initiatives undertaken have been a demonstration that the Baltic states have made regional and international cooperation an integral part of their security policy.

The Baltic cooperation model offers ample opportunity in approximating legislation and economic cooperation to offer incentives to European foreign investments and the Baltic Seas area was another possibility to instrumentalise cooperation with the Nordic countries. Such cooperation among the countries of the two regions included efforts to integrate into the political and economic structures of Europe, development and intensification of economic ties, but also new regional security forms for the Baltic Sea area.

This cooperation became so intense that Nordic Council on 27 June 2000<sup>16</sup> extended an invitation to the Baltic States to join the Nordic Council as an opportunity to further development of the northern European region in the so-called Northern Dimension Project. This multifaceted cooperation would include in addition to Nordic direct investments and tourism development to Baltic countries also joint working groups in political, academic, common educational space, civil society, local government up to joint standing groups to international forums. Cooperation on energy issues has been an important economic cooperation area among the Baltic and Nordic countries.

Since the first half of the previous decade steps were undertaken to develop cooperation between Baltic Region with the Benelux Countries mainly in the field of economy, trade and

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.baltasam.org>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.norden.org/start/start.asp?lang=6>

development of communications systems. The cooperation between these two regions was considered by the Baltic States<sup>17</sup> as another possibility to achieve closer relations with the European Union.

Almost simultaneously with Benelux cooperation, the Baltic Assembly (in May 1994) considered relations with another regional initiative and specifically that of the Visegrad countries as beneficial to the national interest of the Baltic states, thus encouraging cooperation in the political, economic, security and cultural fields.

The above described regional approaches were described from the perspective of Baltic countries regional relations to accomplish their national interest in terms of security, economy but most importantly to accelerate their accession into the Euro-Atlantic Club. As it was described Baltic and Nordic cooperation was the most productive Baltic relationship. Some experts define Baltic Sea regionalism more as a tendency to focus on making the region a profitable market place. This might explain why the EU has been sympathetic to Baltic Sea regionalism, since the project is consistent with both the Union's wider economic objectives as well the goal of promoting closer relations between the Union and its near neighborhood.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS) tends to give priority to infrastructural projects, market economy related issues, investment, the promotion of economic cooperation, trade and investments, as well as the combat of organized crime.

As explained the eastern neighborhood policy of the Baltic Republics as above explained constitute the first ultimate goal of the Baltic cooperation to achieve national independence from USSR. Burdened with the legacies of the past, the process of the independent state building on the part of Baltic Republics but also Russian Federation was a relatively long one, emotional with too much of rhetoric of history. As a consequence, the necessity of working together in areas of economic and cross-border co-operation was overshadowed by the lack of strategic thinking with a clear inability to go beyond history towards new European relations.

The Baltic States' idea of "returning to Europe" remained closely intertwined with the idea of "distancing from Russia". Thus for the most part of the last century decade, while with all other western and southern neighbors, the Baltic institutions were pressing for building relations with Russian federation pressure was exerted for demarcation. The Baltic Assembly, meeting in Jurmala (Kemerli) on 13-15 May 1994, urges the leadership of the Russian Federation (among others) to end the psychological and propagandistic

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.baltasam.org>

<sup>18</sup> The Baltic States and the EU Neighborhood Policy Riga November 22-24 2007

pressure, to demonstrate justice, understanding and a sense of responsibility, to recognise the material and moral damage inflicted on the Baltic States and its citizens during the Soviet occupation; to recognise the existence of unresolved territorial issues in the relations with Estonia and Latvia which were caused by the Soviet Union; not to exert economic or other pressure on the Baltic States, to recognise the fact that the Russian Federation as the successor state of the Soviet Union is also responsible for compensation of the damage and loss caused by the Soviet Union to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania during the years of occupation.

Baltic - Russian realities are far from the desirable preconditions for co-operation and have not lived up to their potentials. Coinciding with the Baltic states' almost non-existent Eastern policy, EU institutions and structures have concentrated much more on neglected problems and certain approaches to conflict resolution than on pushing new strategies for co-operation between Russia and the Baltic states. The Baltic States are a particularly sensitive aspect for the enlarged European Union's Eastern policy, and they differ from the other new member states—first and foremost from Poland—in that they have been deploying less vigor in shaping relations towards their eastern neighbors, especially Russia.

To describe the current, still very tense relations, an opinion poll of 1600 Russians on which states were perceived as Russia's enemies, conducted by the Moscow-based Levada Center in June 2005, according to which respondents named Latvia (49%), Lithuania (42%), Georgia (38%) and Estonia (32%).

Analysts suggest that relations between the Baltic Republics and Russia need to strategic development in a European framework in order to go beyond the current deadlock and clarify mutual beneficial perspective.

## **2. Baltic Cooperation as a model in formulating regional policies, and model for other regions**

“We tell this story because it contains an important lesson. The West again faces major questions about how to reach out to young democracies striving to join our institutions -- in the Balkans, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. The challenge is to tie these countries to the West and its values at a time when enlargement fatigue is setting in and Moscow's opposition is growing. Once again we are in need of creative diplomacy that could bridge the gap between what some of these countries seek and what the West can offer right now. It happened 10 years ago in the Baltics; it can happen again”.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> By Riekstins, Foreign Minister of Latvia. R Asmus, Executive Director GMF, Wall Street Journal January, 16, 2008

In fact, Baltic institutions, and above all Baltic Assembly as the most institutionalized structure of Baltic cooperation have scored great achievements in support of the consolidation of the Baltic Area, but also in attaining Baltic countries main political objectives, independence, integration into NATO and EU, and development of the three republics neighborhood policy. Special credit might be given to the development of common Baltic economic, educational and information technology space, support harmonisation of legislation in conformity with requirements of the European Union, improvement of border - crossing procedures, establishment of the BA Prizes for Literature, the Arts and Science.<sup>20</sup>

Since they entered the European Union, the Baltic States<sup>21</sup> have been able to develop their cooperation with the South Caucasus countries, in regional plans - among which the well-known '3+3' - as well as in bilateral plans. Official visits have been multiplied so much that a real political criss-crossing took place as Caucasian and Baltic deputies, ministers, and heads of states regularly link up Yerevan, Baku, and Tbilisi with Vilnius, Riga, and Tallin. Defense, Euro-Atlantic integration or even law reform are the fields of cooperation in the forefront of these efforts but the Caucasus region is still far from being able to follow the Baltic States, in particular concerning the delicate issue of their relationships with their Russian neighbour. Like all the cooperation initiatives in the region, the relationships between the Baltics and the South Caucasians are based on good intentions, a certain affinity based on a common history, but up to now, this does not seem to have resulted in anything as decisive as in the cooperation that previously united in the Nordic countries (Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Iceland) and the Baltic countries in the '3+3' and '3+5' plans. This is mainly because the South Caucasus<sup>22</sup> has not yet stated specific expectations and remains monopolized by domestic political issues.

But to this role of the Baltic countries, there exist questions that are framed within the EU-Russia context, in which the latter considers this initiative, as a "anti-Russian front". Do<sup>23</sup> the Baltic countries want to impose themselves in the EU by their specific identity, that of countries that imported the European model and then exported it in a post-Soviet version?

The Baltic Model of the United Nations (BALMUN) is a recent project, through which regionals intend to export their experience in building bridges throughout the world. Two international conferences have been organized by the BALMUN Secretariat based on the

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20 [www.baltasam.org](http://www.baltasam.org)

21 SPECIAL REPORT- These Baltic states who want to export their model of integration into the West to the East By Célia CHAUFFOUR and Lili DI PUPPO in Paris and London

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

foundation of our world's diversity. This new Baltic institutions intends to export to other continents the philosophy of building partnerships and building bridges between countries and peoples.

The Baltic States have also proved their commitment to wider security concerns through their contribution on the ground in Bosnia with joint military units. The role of the Baltic States in the NATO enlargement process is thus a special one.

Activities and efforts are being made also to offer to the Western Balkans a model of lessons learned and success stories from the Baltic cooperation and success has been not lacking.

The Adriatic Charter (A3) that brought together in 2003 Albania, Croatia and Macedonia with the sponsorship of the US, modeled after the similar experience of the US with Baltic Republics in their NATO project gave positive results. Actually A3 is becoming A5 with Montenegro and Bosnia - Herzegovina on board with their aspiration of NATO Membership. Contradictions exist in WB for a deeper cooperation of the countries that would incorporate all countries of the region for similar initiatives. Such difficulties are observed from missing dimension of local ownership by the countries of Western Balkans in the framework of the Stability Pact, or the current Regional Cooperation Council.

### **3. Conclusions**

Opinions concerning regional cooperation range from total scepticism to exaggerated support; nevertheless, this paper considers regional cooperation model as important approach that has proved to be beneficial in attaining strategic national priorities of the countries involved.

The Nordic cooperation models has resisted decades, Baltic and Visegrad cooperation schemes are still active and are being re-dimensioned in the current international challenges after EU and NATO integration of the countries. For more than 15 years the Baltic Assembly has benefited from the experience of the Nordic Council and the Benelux Inter parliamentary Consultative Council. It should be mentioned that cooperation among the three initiatives is currently more active than ever, focusing in reviewing common priorities and on the most efficient models for regional development.

It is obvious that there is a mutual interest in setting and reviewing common priorities. Therefore, the Baltic, Nordic and Benelux countries need to continue discussions on the most efficient models for regional development. They are also active in the Nordic Dimension,

which would provide the opportunity to develop comprehensive dialogue with the European Union of the countries including Russia. This shows that regional cooperation based on patterns “as the Baltic Cooperation” or other are, not only instruments to deal with policy objectives of the countries involved (had it not been so this initiative would have ended with the EU and NATO membership of the countries), but the substance itself to long term objectives and prosperity of the countries involved.

All these go to show that regional cooperation and neighbourhood active are relations are complimentary if not instrumental to achieving the main national objectives of the countries involved. Furthermore, the Baltic Assembly, its role and activities on which this paper is most based on, proves to be a very effective model of parliamentary cross-border cooperation. Its role constitutes an example to other regions first and foremost because of its “consultative and coordinating capacities”, which allows for more flexibility and decision to governments and other executive institutions. In most of cases, Baltic Assembly meetings offered just “suggestions” or made “appeals” to government of the three Republics to decide and execute.

Baltic cooperation started as an existentialist movement of the countries through “independence” project, continued as a NATO and EU partnership scheme for “membership”, and is building its future within the Euro-Atlantics space through “European North Dimension”.

## VII. THE STATE OF NORDIC COOPERATION IN A CHANGING EUROPE

*Arne Bengt Lauritsen, Deputy Head of Mission, Danish Embassy, Tirana*

The Deputy Head of Mission of the Danish Embassy brought in the regional conference the Nordic experience of cooperation. After appreciating the importance of this regional event and congratulating with the organizers he said that it is a pleasure to see many participants and experience the great interest for regional solutions in a globalised world. It is indeed an honour and a privilege to be partaking in an exchange of know-how and experience of regional co-operation which is of such great importance to us all.

Today many countries are struggling in face of a deepening financial and following social crisis, implications of climate change and unresolved international and regional conflicts, which need concrete action without delay to promote their settlement. Our governments face these and other challenges, which all require an active coordinated response, for which organizations with a specific regional focus such as the Nordic Council of Ministers, Council of Baltic Sea States, the Visegrad group, the Regional Cooperation Council and SECI can all play a vital role in a globalized world. These regional efforts and instruments are well placed to contribute as facilitating elements towards the resolve of many of these problems. Regional cooperation has the opportunity to be able form an identity, facilitate solutions and to a great extent predetermine a regions future development.

The Nordic Council of Ministers, active now since almost 40 years, work strongly to carry out the ideas behind the concept of regional cooperation, to facilitate the resolution of problems and promote the development of an effective regional course of action.

He took the opportunity to give some background on the Nordic cooperation and of the Nordic Council of Ministers in particular. Nordic cooperation is age-old, and rests upon its own geographical, historical and cultural cohesion. The cooperation comprises Denmark,

Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden as well as the autonomous territories the Faeroe Islands, Greenland and the Åland Islands.

After the Second World War, the Nordic nations responded to the division and bipolarization in the international arena by joining forces. The co-operation was formalized as early as in 1952, before the formation of the European Economic Community. Now, more than 50 years later, Nordic co-operation is both powerful and extremely important.

Official Nordic co-operation is channeled through two organisations: The Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers. The Nordic Council, formed in 1952, is the forum for inter-parliamentary co-operation. The Nordic Council of Ministers, formed in 1971, is the forum for Nordic governmental co-operation.

Overall responsibility for the Nordic Council of Ministers lies with the respective Prime Ministers. In practice, responsibility is delegated to the Ministers for Nordic Co-operation and to the Nordic Committee for Co-operation, which co-ordinates the day-to-day work of the official political Nordic co-operation

Despite its name the Nordic Council of Ministers consists, in fact, of 11 individual councils of ministers. Most of the Nordic ministers for specific policy areas meets a couple of times a year, e.g. culture, environment, education, social and health, energy, and finance. Other ministers meet only on informal basis, for example the Nordic foreign ministers and ministers for defence.

The Nordic cooperation also consists of around 20 Nordic institutions with different responsibilities. Some is focusing on health issues and others on research. The Chairmanship of the Council of Ministers, which is held for a period of one year, rotates between the five Nordic countries. Decisions made in the Council of Ministers are unanimous. Issues are prepared and followed up by the various Committees of Senior Officials which consist of civil servants from the member countries. Iceland is currently chairing the Council of Ministers and which will be followed by Denmark in 2010.

The Nordic cooperation has three main perspectives: The Nordic region in its own identity, the Nordic region as part of the Baltic Sea region – or perhaps more aptly Northern Europe – and the Nordic region as an active participant in a broad European cooperation, primarily within the EU.

The NCM has instigated, supported and is taking part in a vast number of regional initiatives, to address and advance, the unique challenges and opportunities which are present in the Baltic Sea region. Inclusive cooperation remains a keyword for the various activities of NCM. To facilitate collaboration in the wider Baltic Sea Region NCM has offices in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania (since 1991), in St Petersburg (since 1995) and in Kaliningrad (since 2006). NCM's cooperation with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania is a political cooperation generating joint Nordic-Baltic benefits. The key areas of cooperation in the coming years are:

- Education, research and innovation
- Business, cluster networks and creative industries
- Environment, climate and energy
- Challenges to welfare societies
- Cross-border regional cooperation

He underlined that Nordic-Baltic co-operation within the framework of the EU will gain increased importance in a positive sense, without being perceived, for this reason, as promoting the creation of blocs. The fact remains that smaller countries in the same geographical area will often share common aims, even if they may not be specifically embodied in established relations.

An important aspect of NCM's cooperation with Northwest Russia is support to the implementation of the Northern Dimension. The NCM sees itself as a contributor to the fulfilment of the Northern Dimension objectives – and has therefore for example made the Northern Dimension an integrated part of its policies and collaboration activities in the Baltic Sea Region and the Barents region. The key areas for the NCM cooperation with Northwest Russia in the coming years are:

- Education, research and innovation
- Environment, climate and energy
- Conditions for economic cooperation and trade
- Northern Dimension partnerships
- Promotion of democracy and civic society

NCM supports today approximately 100 projects related to the Northern Dimension. Within this cooperation, and to make it more effective, participation on all levels, by both men and women, and the inclusion of civil society remains cornerstones. NCM remain focused on youth's access to independent higher education and an example of this is the support to the European Humanities University in Vilnius for Belarusian students.

This support is given through a newly established trust fund in cooperation with the European Union as well as other individual countries and donors such as the US and many of the Baltic and Visegrad countries. The Nordic Council of Ministers also have enhanced cooperation with other regional organizations such as Barents Euro-Arctic Council, Arctic Council and the Council of Baltic Sea States.

As an example of cooperation with the Council of Baltic Sea States, the two organisation have initiated a project on strengthening cooperation among different Euro-regions around the Baltic Sea. The project, which has received support from the EC, has promoted spatial development and territorial integration in the Baltic Sea Region by strengthening the capacity of the Euro-regions and by building a network of Euro-regions for continuous capacity-building and sharing of experience.

Furthermore, NCM place great importance on the role which NGO is playing and can play towards addressing many of the challenges within the broader Baltic Sea region. To this end, the Council of Ministers launched a special NGO Programme for the Baltic Sea Region in early October 2006 funding co-operation initiatives between Nordic, Baltic, Polish, Belarusian and Russian NGOs. To date, more than 35 multinational NGO projects has been launched addressing issues such as human rights, environment, and social issues.

He also mentioned that the Nordic cooperation also have had cooperation in this part of Europe. Some years ago (2003) an extensive cultural project, entitled Norden Balkan Culture Switch, was initiated between the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM) and the West Balkan countries. The project had two objectives. Firstly, to build a new network between the Nordic and West Balkan countries. Secondly, to introduce the Nordic co-operation model. As the direct result of this initiative and the engagement of the cultural minister of Albania, the ministers of culture of the Nordic countries and 9 ministers of culture and representatives of South-East Europe met in Copenhagen under the Danish Chairmanship in 2005. On that occasion the SEE Ministers and representatives signed the Charter of the Council of Ministers for Culture of South East Europe (SEE) in Copenhagen on 31 March 2005. Let me quote what was told by the current Danish Minister of Justice, at that time the Minister for Cultural Affairs, Brian Mikkelsen: "I see this joint meeting as demonstrating that Nordic co-operation is not just a historical and inwardly-directed matter. Our peaceful co-operation in the area of culture can be a source of inspiration not merely among our close neighbours, but also in areas of Europe recently marked by violent conflicts".

The challenges related to climate, environment, energy, research, health, welfare, wellbeing

and the financial markets cannot be solved by one country on its own. They require a coordinated approach. For the Nordic countries it is natural to look for joint solutions. The Nordic prime ministers underlined this in June 2007 when they took action to strengthen Nordic co-operation as a means to better meet the challenges of globalization. They stated a shared and positive attitude towards opportunities and challenges of globalisation.

According to the prime ministers Nordic co-operation should be more focused on globalization and the opportunities stemming from it. They therefore called upon joint Nordic activities related to research and education, innovation, climate and energy, welfare and health issues. The prime ministers also urged for more profound co-operation with the Baltic countries and other regional organizations to reinforce the competitiveness of the entire Baltic Sea region and Europe.

The new globalization initiatives meant that Nordic co-operation has entered a new phase. We are now working hard with our new agenda and the recent financial crisis increases the need and urgency for this new direction in Nordic collaboration.

Let me account for some of the main activities that we have initiated in response to these challenges: Within the Nordic Council of Ministers' general focus on globalization we are pursuing a set of 15 concrete globalization projects. The Nordic Top-level research initiative is one of the most interesting of these current globalization projects.

The initiative shall develop excellent research in close collaboration between research and enterprises and promote innovation. In the first phase the focus is on climate, energy and the environment, and in the second phase the focus will be on welfare and health.

Furthermore, the initiative aims to strengthen the knowledge base and competitiveness of the Nordic countries. It enables a critical mass on central areas, on a scale that the countries cannot achieve each on their own. It will also enable dynamic effects from already existing national research investments.

Through this initiative the Nordic countries are creating a platform that can be used for wider international cooperation and interaction. This is the largest research cooperation project in the Nordic council of minister's history, the test program of the project has a public funding of approximately 50 million EUROS over the next five years, with additional funds to be drawn into it from the private sector and EU programs. This is extraordinarily ambitious within the Nordic context.

Other projects are supporting the climate negotiations in Copenhagen in December this Year, promotion of higher education in the Nordic countries, a yearly Nordic Globalization Forum, harmonization of electricity markets in the Nordic countries, development and profiling of the Nordic Region as a centre for creative industries just to mention a few. The 2010 Danish Chairmanship will remain firmly committed towards this coordinated approach towards global challenges and opportunities finding and developing joint solutions.

Finally he added that the necessity of regional cooperation is not always a sufficient condition for successful regional cooperation, however, most countries acknowledged the benefits of regional cooperation in various fields. We should and can not necessarily copy a mechanism of regional cooperation, but we should all take the opportunity to learn from each other, and the experiences each of us has made.

He underlined that the Nordic Council of Ministers strive for a continuous development of relations with other the regional organisations, to learn from experiences made and to find joint practical solutions. We do not just want to establish formal regional frameworks, but enable a dialogue on important issues and find concrete solutions to the many challenges we face such as the environment, education and health. I am convinced that we face and can rise towards these many challenges with confidence and hard work, and that regional cooperation will play a vital part towards their solution.

## VIII. REGIONAL OWNERSHIP: DOES IT EXIST IN THE REGIONAL COOPERATION SCHEMES?

*Mimika Loshi, Expert on Parliamentary Cooperation, RCC Secretariat, Sarajevo*

**A**fter thanking IDM most sincerely for their generous hospitality and for organization of this event Ms Loshi underlined the fact that regional ownership marks a new era in regional cooperation schemes after Regional Cooperation Council took over from Stability Pact for SEE. The term “regional ownership” started to circulate as substantial progress on the ground was achieved over the years since Stability Pact creation and political, economic and social conditions improved throughout the region. The need was felt for a more regionally owned framework to reflect the increased maturity of the region.

Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) , the organization that I represent, just a few weeks ago had its first anniversary of its foundation and this seems a good moment to look at what its structure looks like in order to answer the question.

To that effect she spoke about three layers or regional schemes in which regional cooperation can be best perceived and encountered. First one is the political layer depicted by the SEECP; second one is the operational layer – the RCC and third one are the small cells scattered around the region- and those are regional initiatives. All these three schemes are very much connected and cooperate very closely.

### **1. Political layer – South East European Cooperation Process (SEECP)**

SEECP is a political forum launched in 1996 Sofia. As the only “homemade” initiative, the SEECP seeks to define itself as an authentic voice of SEE with its rotating chairmanship, 11 participating states, and serving as a political umbrella to RCC. At the Bulgaria-chaired meeting in Sofia, the SEE countries laid the foundations for regional co-operation for the purposes of creating an atmosphere of trust, good neighbourly relations and stability.

Objectives: include the strengthening of security and political situation, intensification of

economic relations and co-operation in human resources, democracy, justice, and battle against illegal activities. It is the intention of the SEECP to enable its members to approach the European and Euro-Atlantic structures through the strengthening of good neighborly relations and transformation of the region into an area of peace and stability.

## **2. Operational layer – Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)**

Regional Cooperation Council is the successor of Stability Pact for SEE with the main difference being that it is led, and financed 1/3 by the countries of the region and employs only people from the region unlike SP who was led and financed entirely by internationals. The other finances come 1/3 from the European Commission, 1/3 by the individual donor countries. RCC is the operational arm of the SEECP but also works under the SEE countries agenda.

### **Objectives**

The Regional Co-operation Council inherited the mandate of the Stability Pact to oversee co-operation processes in South Eastern Europe and to support European and Euro-Atlantic integration of the region. Enhance regional cooperation, re-branding the region as well as become the main interlocutor between EC and the SEE countries on the EUs MB IPA funds.

The RCC functions as a focal point for regional cooperation in Southeast Europe. Also RCC provides the Southeast European Cooperation Process (SEECP) with operational capacities and acts as a forum for the continued involvement of those members of the international donor community engaged in the region. The work of the RCC focuses on six priority areas:

- economic and social development,
- energy and infrastructure,
- justice and home affairs,
- security cooperation,
- building human capital, and
- parliamentary cooperation as an overarching theme.

The organization maintains close working relations with all actors of relevance in these areas, such as governments, international organizations, international financial institutions, regional organizations, civil society and the private sector.

## **3. Regional initiatives**

Approximately 25 regional initiatives and task forces which have since their creation most

of them from Stability Pact times are still very active and have their means of generating funds and channeling projects and programmes.

The RCC provides political guidance to and receives substantive input from relevant regional task forces and initiatives active in specific thematic areas of regional cooperation.

All these initiatives are based in the region and supported by host governments. They are the backbone of RCCs work since each of them has some kind of status relationship with the RCC secretariat. The regional initiatives range from those focusing on security such as RACVIAC and SEESAC; to those in Building Human Capital - such as Task Force Building fostering human capital and ERI-SEE; Gender Task force; Economic and social affairs: CEFTA, e-SEE, Health Network, Business Advisory Council; Justice and Home Affairs-Migration Asylum Refugee Return Initiative, Regional Anti-corruption Initiative.

In conclusion she added that the region has reached maturity and it is palpable in these types of regional cooperation schemes that exist and were mentioned but most importantly this new era marks what Erhard Busek observes "first time the fate of the countries in SEE is not decided abroad in other European or world capitals but in the region itself". We are finally on the driving seat and we are the ones deciding where the region will go.

## IX. IDEAS FOR FOLLOW UP: WHAT CAN WORK FOR THE REGION?

European best practices of cooperation are of a great importance for the WB countries not only for learning from their successes but also from their mistakes. In this context, it is of a great importance to take into consideration the point of views of civil society's representatives, member of parliaments and academics from the WB region. Their ideas were of a crucial importance in the regional conference in order to brainstorm and understand the factors that are impeding the region to further cooperate between each other, and also attempt to draw recommendations which could work for the region.

All the participants from different Balkan countries agreed on the fact that most of the initiatives of cooperation are coming from abroad and it is important that the countries of the region take ownership of the process and support these first initiatives in all the fields. They should also deal with internal issues but also with inherited unsolved problems with each other.

**Arian Starova**, a member of the Albanian parliament and President of the Atlantic Association of Albania, focused his message on what could be done on the Parliamentary level to boost regional cooperation. He emphasized the fact that in the WB this issue is very problematic, wide and opened. He suggested the idea of the creation of a Forum such as a Parliamentary Regional Assembly in order to discuss different issues between the countries. Mr. Starova emphasized that nowadays, the region is much safer as it has been in the past, and the parliaments should be initiators of concrete projects in order to face problems of the region. They should be more dynamic by initiating concrete proposals thus having an impact, pursue tangible actions and not remain at the level of discussion. The best way to start with is to cooperate in all areas and more particularly in the economic field. He brought the example of the highway Durres - Kukes which will be useful not only for Albanians but

also for the whole region. In the future it can be used by other people from the Balkans and will have a positive impact for greater economic, cultural and tourist exchange. In this framework, Mr Starova stressed the fact that non-governmental organizations as well, can play a greater role and be more active in raising awareness and organize round tables by focusing on different aspects of regional cooperation. Hence, by having big problems at the institutional level, regional cooperation can move on in a more advance stage only if academia, civil society, think tanks try to be more active.

**Arta Dade**, the Vice Chairman of Parliamentary Commission of Foreign Affairs supported the idea of the creation of caucuses on the Albanian parliament which would support all the initiatives on regional cooperation as a key initiative to further deepen cooperation in the region and as the main tool for having an impact. She also urged like her colleague Mr. Starova, for a parliament more active on this regard. The creation of such caucuses in other Balkan countries parliaments would be of a great importance in order to coordinate programs and initiatives and further push for their implementation. Additionally, she focused also on the idea of intensifying the Parliamentary Diplomacy with a particular focus on the reforms regarding Euro-Atlantic integration. However, she said that the parliamentary dialogue should be more effective through the active participation of MP-s from various political wings.

**Qemal Minxhozi**, MP and Former Ambassador of Albania to Denmark, emphasized the importance of this conference as regional cooperation is a key element for being successful in certain areas such as environment, energy and justice. With reference to the latter he mentioned that criminal activities such as cross border crime and different kind of trafficking are more likely to be successful if the countries cooperate with each other and can not be solved by countries themselves. Thus, a coordinated approach is needed also in the field of environment, energy, climate, and transport by mentioning the Nordic successful experience of cooperation in such fields. Because of the limited size of each WB country and the division of the economic space in the region, there is no other option then to embark an intense regional cooperation as the best way forward.

**Dusan Janic** from Serbia focused on the sustainability of regional cooperation initiatives. He emphasized the fact that regional initiatives have a great importance but for having an impact, it is necessary to think for middle or long term initiatives. Additionally, he stressed the fact that firstly we should be open to cooperation and afterwards we can talk for regional cooperation. In the case of Serbia he mentioned current internal problems between different actors which have not a unified position and are not playing a positive role in the case of

Kosovo. He also stressed the fact that experts may offer their contribution and reflect recommendations of the Europeans, nevertheless at the national level the voice of experts is not sufficiently heard. He believes that the best way for improving cooperation in Serbia is to solve issues related to the national identity and cooperate more with international organizations, particularly with the European Union as the majority of Serbian politician look toward Moscow. Therefore the political will of the governments of the countries is crucial for the advancement of regional cooperation. Mr Janic considered advantageous to work on cross-border euro-regions among different bordering areas of Western Balkan countries.

According to **Gjergji Vurmo** from Institute for Democracy and Mediation perhaps one of the main deficiencies of the Balkan record of regional cooperation represents the fact that, frequently external incentives and factors have been the major driving force of regional interactions and cooperation initiatives. Furthermore, the main rationale behind these initiatives has included “common interests” as perceived by external actors which have not always corresponded to the local context and needs. So, instead of using geographical criteria – e.g. Western Balkans, Adriatic / Black Sea etc. – for defining and shaping regional cooperation, local actors and stakeholders (and not external ones) should not only engage, but most importantly, should initiate and lead regional cooperation initiatives as an added value and significant advantage for the national development, regional achievements and common road towards developed communities.

**Sanja Mihajlovic** from the Centre for Security Studies in Bosnia and Herzegovina focused on her speech on the regional cooperation of civil society organisations and their cooperation with the parliaments. She emphasized the fact that the political conditions in the Balkans are changing, with countries moving to being EU pre-accession countries (status of transition). This has had a strong impact on the cooperation strategies of all donors, and has left the civil society and political leaders in these countries in a state of incertitude. Donors are moving out of the countries, and new donors and funding mechanisms are not yet in place, or are not yet well known to the public. A chance to share experiences, compare policies, and discuss possible future plans seems highly important as well as appropriate at this juncture in time.

After expressing her gratitude to the organizers for the invitation **Ms. Stojanovic** focused on the situation in her country. She highlighted the fact that the current situation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is complex and ambiguous, defined as the most critical since the achievement of the Dayton Peace Agreement. This is a view of both international and local specialists,

as well as ordinary people, faced with insecurity and fears for the future. Burdened with difficult legacies of war and deterioration of society, Bosnia and Herzegovina has, more or less, been forced into the processes of reforms, conditional for its accession to the European Union and NATO, and crucial for the future development of the country.

The implementation of the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) is ongoing since the 1st of July 2008. The progress is evident but not satisfying, as only two thirds of the tasks that Bosnia and Herzegovina has regarding SAA, are fulfilled. Complicated relations between political elite, weak state authorities and absence of adequate normative regulation practically disabled civil society in performing their role in the democratization of the security sector. Local experts who wished to ensure sustainability of such organizations often faced a number of obstacles often relating to ethnic mistrust within the local population, ad hoc financial support and weak coordination amongst the NGO sector itself. Despite a relatively large number of NGOs in BiH (about 9,000), a very small number of organizations are active in the field of security. For a long time the CSS was the only NGO dealing with security issues. In last two to three years, we noticed appearances of similar NGOs which devote their work mainly to the organization of public events with an aim to raise awareness amongst a wider audience. At the time when CSS was formed, there was no government institution on the state level in charge of security issues. In accordance with the DPA, all responsibility concerning security-related issues was assigned to the entity governments. Therefore, the starting phases of our activities were largely concerned with advocacy and lobbying of government officials for the establishment of the necessary state-level institutions in order to reach the international requirements. Parallel to this line of work, CSS's activities also focused on promoting the democratic parliamentary oversight of the security sector and strengthening of the civil military relations. In that period CSS organized more than 30 seminars with different topics related to the explanation of the new security environment and necessities for conducting SSR as way to achieve fostering the process to Euro-Atlantic integration. CSS tried also to produce as many publications as possible from these events to contribute towards an evident lack of the educational material published in the local languages.

Cooperation with local governments are on the whole not satisfactory, although during the past few years the situation seems to have improved with local authorities now beginning to understand the role and benefits of the NGO sector. There are some mechanisms for cooperation already in place, such as: Memorandum of Partnership signed last year between Council of Ministers of BiH and NGO sector; also municipalities are required to allocate a part of their budget to the NGO sector and some municipalities even have representatives

from the NGO sector involved in the decision making process. In the case of CSS, we have a long standing cooperation with the Joint Parliamentary Commission on Defence and Security, and we have acted as a support element to their work. By this I mean, executing projects that fall under the auspices of security sector reform. Moreover, in cooperation with JCDS, CSS has furthered the development of regional inter-parliamentary cooperation by organizing regional gatherings of parliamentarians in the field of democratic oversight of security sector.

The involvement of civil society is considered a vital element in effective and accountable governance of security institutions, and in the long-term success of democratic reform efforts. Ideally, civil society institutions play a key role in monitoring government policy and the activities of state security institutions, in presenting alternative assessments of security issues, and in identifying alternate policy options.

In relation to the regional component of CSO cooperation in WB it can be stated that it is highly limited due to the insufficiently developed organisations, at least in the case of BiH. Over the past 15 years, or since the DPA, the cooperation has seen a positive trend. However, this trend is not permanent and relies more on the ad hoc basis of regional project implementation cooperation. In the instance of CSS, regional cooperation has revolved mainly on the issues of SALW control project, utilizing the regional centre SEESAC resources and expertise, and using them mostly in a sense of accessing database of similar organisations in the region. Moreover, regional cooperation has centered more recently on the issues of CFSP and ESDP. Unfortunately, there is a lack of sustainability in this cooperation, as when most of the projects are completed, so has the cooperation.

In our experience, it is of imperative value to establish better institutional cooperation between academic institutions and CSO which still lacks formal and stable means of cooperation. On the notion of new incentives which are present in the region, EU Seventh Framework Programme (FP7) is certainly new for BiH, as we were only able to join it at the end of last year. This has enabled BiH to participate in research programmes in the WB region.

In the case of CSS, we strongly advocate and strive for sustainable and formal shapes of cooperation on the regional level that would enhance the overall process of EU and E-A integration. Then the context of regional cooperation: just say on visa – currently BiH is undergoing an assessment phase by the observers of the EU visa liberalization aspect. Regional cooperation would benefit very much from this.

There is strong political will of the countries in the region to implement all of the mechanisms that would enable adherence to these declarations and simultaneously comply with EU standards and in some case, reform requirements.

**Professor Mladen Stanicic** from Institute of International Relations from Croatia believes that the landmark where the WB countries should start their cooperation is the economic field. He brought the example of the European Community which started its cooperation initially on the economic level. Following this successful cooperation, additionally in the Balkans the best way to start deepening cooperation is the economic field where it is easier to agree with each other compared with other issues. Mr. Janic stressed the fact that Balkan countries are separated concerning common goals and interests. In the case of Kosovo he mentioned that Serbia is playing a dysfunctional role and earning time for that purpose. Serbia does not recognize Kosovo and if we create another regional institution but do not include Kosovo then we do not start well from the beginning. Therefore, the recognition of each other is an important step for further cooperation.

**Ms Njomza Emini**, Member of the Kosovo Parliament accentuated the great importance of regional cooperation in the light of European Union integration which is the main goal of the WB countries. She emphasized that fact that, in order to cooperate with each other and overcome the turbulent past the best start is the recognition of the new state of Kosovo which nowadays is an undeniable reality. She also mentioned that independence of Kosovo has been an important factor for the stability of the whole region. The next step regards its recognition by all the neighbors as a tool for paving the path for constructive cooperation.

The Croatian Ambassador to Albania **Mr. Darko Javorski** focused on the reality of the WB by underlining the fact that in the region are missing important infrastructure facets such as railways, roads, electricity, communication ect. Therefore it is very hard to promote exchange if the region is missing the basics. Hence, governments of the WB countries must embark common projects on regional infrastructure, energy, etc. aiming the development of the region and increasing regional cooperation. Mr. Javorski also remarked that the region is plunged with many problems such as Kosovo vs Serbia, Croatia vs Slovenia, Macedonia vs Greece, Bosnia Herzegovina as such. Therefore although we should focus on promoting Balkan cooperation, regional actors should be more realistic by trying to face internal challenges, but not underestimating also the disputes with the neighbors.

## X. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE REGION

In the framework of the Regional conference that IDM organized in cooperation with its partners some recommendations were drawn, addressed to the governments and civil societies of the region. Recommendations will mainly consider internal dynamics of the region, while the exterior regional settings which favors and facilitates regional cooperation by a range of mechanisms and is particularly important in cases of conflictual societies like those in the Western Balkans (WB), is considered less.

Regional cooperation is a principle of a great importance for security, political stability and economic progress in the Western Balkan countries. In view of the strategic importance of this principle the following recommendations come out of the conference:

- The region must **move away from what has been essentially an internationally driven process towards a greater ownership of its own future**. Bearing this in mind, regional actors should work together to get real ownership of cooperation at all levels and areas. Stability Pact for South East Europe was conceived to be the first comprehensive conflict-prevention strategy of the international community and was transferred to regional ownership by creating the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) in February 2008, thus helping the countries of the region to contribute to and enhance regional cooperation. However, regional ownership needs to be more visible in WB countries. The European Union but especially the countries of the WB should further assist the RCC in being more visible in their efforts to promote regional cooperation. In this regard it is essential that the momentum for regional cooperation should not be lost, on the contrary, further concrete initiatives from the countries of the region in the regional cooperation sphere should always be embraced.

- Despite the differences, WB countries **share common values** of Western Liberal Democracies, peace, stability, human rights and market economy. Their final goal is to become part of Euro-Atlantic structures. In this context, even with divergent interests the WB should go beyond history toward new European relations and draw up a new framework for political cooperation. Narrow nationalist discourses should be abandoned in favor of more inclusive concepts of civil society, thus establishing closer local cross-border ties, acknowledging the position of minorities and multiethnic societies.
- **Political will** should be in place in order to have (sustainable) regional cooperation. Through intensive **political regional cooperation**, political consensus and mutual trust should be built up in the WB. Regional cooperation is needed as a key ingredient to stability, good neighborly and political relations, helping overcome nationalism. Political will and commitment by the countries of the region are crucial in promoting regional cooperation in its various forms. Mistrust among neighbors and ethnic antagonisms do not appear to be particularly strong deterrents to better cooperation; instead, ***the lack of genuine political will and the structural difficulties are identified as the main obstacles to regional cooperation.***
- Regional cooperation is a useful instrument in addressing the security challenges facing the region, since many urgent issues, such as organized crime, corruption, integrated border management and illegal migration, can be effectively tackled only by a cross-border approach. Therefore, closer cooperation here is indispensable, not just as an end in itself but also as a signal/message to the rest of Europe that WB countries share common objectives with the EU, on this issue. Hence, efforts to address the criminal threats to the stabilization and development of the region, will only be successful if the WB countries ***work together to fight corruption and trans-national organized crime, which prevents legitimate economic growth and undermines democratic rule of law and democratic stability in the region.***
- Deepening regional cooperation should be more **economic driven**. Regional cooperation is essential for increasing prosperity and economic growth. Therefore, economic development is a key issue if the WB countries are to make better, faster progress towards European integration. In many areas, such as energy, trade and transport, because of the limited size of each WB country and the division of the economic space in the region, there is no other option than to embark an intense regional cooperation as the best way forward. The recent financial crisis increases the need and urgency on this direction in order to reinforce the competitiveness, as a means to better face & meet the challenges

of globalization (the Nordic Cooperation Council experience & V4 offer best practices on the this regard)

- Adapt EU (and more particularly Hungarian) experience and best practices associated with a successful EU-wide scheme on local development by implanting the LEADER approach in the Western Balkans. This blueprint can generate lasting effect by spurring development in local communities throughout the region. ***Whether in the EU or in the Western Balkans, rural development is neither a minor nor a peripheral problem.*** Rural development policy is an increasingly important component of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Over half of the EU's population lives in rural areas, which cover 90 % of the EU's territory. In South Eastern Europe in general, agriculture earns 30 % or more of GDP, and a commensurate proportion of the population is rural, varying from 25 to 40 % of the total population. Rural areas are an important vehicle for the preservation of cultural heritage and social values and their development involves significant political issues;
- **European best practices** (V4, Baltic, and Nordic) should be taken into consideration but also adjusted to the local context. Their experience has been developed in a context which is very different compared to the WB reality. Their consolidated national identity and existing state structures has served as the necessary institutional framework for cooperation. Their model presupposes the commitment to a single geopolitical orientation and pre-existing fundamental consensus on the principles of state coexistence. While in the WB their model may serve (eg. Visegrad model) as a form of trust building among states, which want to pursue the same accession path, and may demonstrate solidarity in selected issues of common interest.
- **Experience sharing** should be promoted not only among different regions (V4, Nordic, Baltic countries, WB, EU members etc.) but also **among countries within the same region** (e.g. Croatian experience of EU integration being in a more advance stage compared to other countries would be very useful for the other countries of the region to catch up in the integration processes. A good example on this regard is the assistance given to Slovakia from the other Visegrad countries with concrete steps such as the assistance given by the Czechs concerning the harmonisation of Slovak legislation (provision of translations, consultations, ect) in the first years of negotiations with the EU.
- Examine the adaptability of the **Euroregion model** to promote cross-border cooperation

in the region, as reflected in the work of the Carpathian Foundation. This is a cross-border network of regional foundations that focuses primarily on inter-regional and transfrontier activities, economic and community development in the bordering regions of Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine. It encourages public/private/NGO partnerships, including cross-border and inter-ethnic approaches to help prevent conflicts and to promote regional development. It implements development programs and provides financial and technical assistance to projects which have resulted in tangible benefits to the communities on both sides of national borders of the Carpathian Mountains. The same initiative can be promoted between countries in the region such as **Montenegro, Albania, Serbia and Kosovo**, which share borders with each other and might improve the quality of life of people in disadvantaged areas in the small villages in the borders.

- Regional cooperation initiatives should be better defined and **guided by common/converging interests**. While this form of voluntary regional community lacks forms of enforcement mechanisms, it may provide a component that is much needed in the process of EU accession, creation of a new identity and establishing norms, characteristics of a community of liberal democracies. Additionally, by cooperating on issues of converging interest which enjoy popular support will be easier to take initiatives that do not limit in defending single national interests but also take into account the common interest.
- While **institutionalized forms** of regional cooperation should not be a goal per se (rather they follow naturally when all conditions are met) intensive contacts and discussion forums (official or not) between officials of all levels (ministers, deputy ministers, special envoys, MPs, Presidents, etc) would additionally serve regional cooperation needs/challenges. Moreover, the already existing institutions, especially the existing ones in the field of parliamentary cooperation in SEE (i.e. **Regional Secretariat for Parliamentary Cooperation** in SEE, Cetinje Forum and COSAP) should be better utilized and supported by the national parliaments of the WB countries so they can deliver concrete results.
- Critical views exist on the region's **lack in institution who will promote collaborative research** among WB countries, providing incentives for cooperation, developing joint programmes, and encouraging academic cooperation and networking similar to International Visegrad Fund. However, the existence of the Steering Platform for Research in WB has to be mentioned, since it operates and coordinates Research structures in the region. Its main objective is to support the enhanced integration of the Western Balkans countries in the European Research Area. Moreover the Regional Research Strategy for WB has been developed and will be launched at the Ministerial meeting on 24 April in

Sarajevo, in co-organization of RCC and the Czech EU presidency. Having this in mind, it is still necessary to further needed efforts from relevant EU institutions and the respective Ministries in WB countries in order to keep up the momentum and advance regional cooperation in this field.

- **Civil society** should be more active in advocating, awareness raising, enhancing but also elaborating regional cooperation strategies within each country. For instance, a regional inter-parliamentary forum for WB countries may be significantly encouraged by Civil Society actors in the region. Such forum may well address key concerns but also eventual 'clashes' between various regional stakeholders.
- Use the general model of the International Visegrad Fund which gives out grants for civil society development on condition of common projects developed by NGOs from at least 2 or ideally all V4 countries **to create a Fund to promote civil society cooperation, cultural cooperation and reconciliation;**
- Regional cooperation is not given sufficient attention in the discourse and practical engagements of any of the political elites in the region. Therefore, an open **public debate** who will increase popular awareness concerning the benefits of regional cooperation will stress the political elites of all countries in the region to work together and sketch realistic plans of action and cooperation and solve





