

20-YEARS OF VISEGRAD FOUR COOPERATION:

IMPLICATIONS FOR EU ENLARGEMENT

Istanbul | March 28, 2011

About This Meeting

This roundtable, organized by the Istanbul Consul Generals of the Visegrad Four (V4) countries, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, under the chairmanship of the Consul General of Slovakia, Amb. Dr. Jozef Šesták, and in cooperation with GPoT Center featured two panels evaluating the past twenty years of the V4 group and exploring implications for EU enlargement. The meeting took place on the premises of Istanbul Kültür University with the participation of the Consul Generals of the V4 countries in Istanbul; the Consul General of Belgium, Mr. François del Marmol; the Consul General of Romania, Ms. Stefana Greavu; experts from the V4 countries and Turkey; media; and students.



OPENING REMARKS

Amb. Dr. Jozef Šesták

Consul General of Slovakia in Istanbul

Amb. Dr. Jozef Šesták emphasized that in the over twenty years of its existence, the V4 group, i.e. Czechoslovakia (later on the Czech Republic and Slovakia), Hungary and Poland, has become a successful model for regional cooperation. The decision of these countries to join their efforts and form the V4 group had a positive impact on their individual, and demanding, accession processes to the EU. When the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia became members of the EU in 2004, it was not only a successful achievement for the four individual states but also for the V4 as a whole.

Now that the primary goals (membership in the EU and NATO) of the V4 group have been achieved, the group continues to collaborate on various issues and focuses on promoting stability in Central Europe. The countries also consult with each other within the institutional structures of the EU, primarily when European policies are being adopted. V4 cooperation is not limited to the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia only. Collaboration with Bulgaria and Romania in the energy sector within the framework of the V4+

is a promising development. "I am positive we can come up with a mechanism to include Turkey in the V4 process and cooperation," Amb. Dr. Jozef Šesták said. He also acknowledged the support that Turkey gave to the V4 countries on their way to NATO membership. On behalf of the Consul Generals of the V4 countries in Istanbul, he affirmed that the group is in favor of Turkey's membership in the EU.

PANEL I: COMMON LESSONS TO BE DRAWN FROM THE V4 COUNTRIES' EU EXPERIENCE

Tomáš Strážay

Fellow and Head of the Central and South-eastern Europe Research Program, Slovak Foreign Policy Association

"20 years ago nobody imagined that any celebration of V4 would take place, much less that it would take place in Istanbul," Mr. Strážay noted at the opening of his presentation. He pointed out that the Visegrad group has always been full of asymmetries, including of territory, population, agricultural sector, industry etc. However, despite these asymmetries and tensions in bilateral relations, the countries have always been able to cooperate in pursuing strategic interests and overcoming common challenges.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the four Central European states were perceived as an island of stability – especially when compared to the developments in Eastern and South Eastern Europe. Yet, when the goal of becoming a member of the EU and NATO was first introduced in 1991 as part of the V4 agenda, most politicians were skeptical. The objective was referred to as a dream rather than as something likely to happen.

In the 1990s, Slovakia was lacking behind the other three countries – it started accession negotiations with the EU two years later, and entered NATO five years later, than the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland. Slovakia thus was able to benefit from V4 cooperation the most through learning from the experiences and know-how with the accession processes of its three Visegrad neighbors. Mr. Strážay underlined that it was also thanks to V4 cooperation that Slovakia managed to catch up with the group and acceded

to the EU together with the other three countries in 2004.

Mr. Strážay further noted that the V4 group works on the basis of common interest. There is no common institution or secretariat, which would bind the countries together. The possibility to enlarge the group was dismissed on the premises that flexibility and coordination among members would become rather difficult.

After EU and NATO membership were achieved, some scholars and politicians started questioning the need for the V4. However, countries such as Germany perceive the Visegrad group as an interesting and significant regional group within the EU, particularly because the population of the V4 countries totals 65 million.

According to Mr. Strážay, Turkey is an interesting partner for the Visegrad group, and



Turkey's membership in the EU is in common interest of all four countries. Even though the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic, Mr. Mikuláš Dzurinda, does not want the V4 to become a lobby group, Mr. Strážay maintained that the V4 could still lobby for and back Turkey's membership in the EU.

Until the present the V4 has focused mostly on Eastern Europe and Balkan, but a new dimension has been introduced in the framework of external cooperation. Now the V4 seeks deeper collaboration with countries in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, and this also opens doors for enhancing relations between the V4 and Turkey.

At the end of his speech, Mr. Strážay underlined that the main message of the 20th anniversary of the V4 is that collaboration between countries brings more advantages than disadvantages. The greatest achievement of the Visegrad group is that the problems in bilateral relations between the members do not have any significant impact on regional cooperation.

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Tomáš Strážay

"Despite the zero problems with neighbors [foreign] policy, we are still far away from true cooperation with all neighbors and have something to learn from the V4."

Sezin Öney

Sezin Öney

Columnist, daily Taraf; PhD candidate, Central European University

"Despite the zero problems with neighbors [foreign] policy, we are still far away from true cooperation with all neighbors and have something to learn from the V4," Ms. Öney stated in her speech during the first panel. She pointed out that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey likes to see itself as a power broker and negotiator, but that true cooperation with neighbors and other countries is still a somewhat of a foreign idea.

Even though citizens of the V4 countries do not see themselves as people with a Central European identity, bilingualism and cultural interaction in the region is strongly visible. "I grew up totally isolated from Turkey's neighbors, with almost no interaction, and in that sense I was very impressed with the V4," she commented, referring to her experience in Budapest, where she studies at the Central European University. Referring to the accession process of the V4 countries to EU and NATO, she pointed out that the individual members of the Visegrad group could achieve more together than independently.

Despite the fact that Turkey was transition country in the 1990s, it was not considered as part of the 2004 enlargement wave because it did not have the communist experience. Referring to the current group of candidate states, she noted that Turkey is not considered as part of the Balkan. Rather, Turkey has always been considered as an island by itself with no "zone." Ms. Öney argued that this approach should be overcome. According to the latest survey, 60 percent of the Turkish population thinks of themselves as part of Europe, yet Europe is not a tangible idea in Turkey. "It is very much obvious that we do not have the desire to be a part of EU anymore as compared to 6 years ago," she said.

At the end of her speech, Ms. Öney concluded that Turkey should see from the V4 experience that its integration process to the EU will have its ups and downs, that it is a marathon, and it is important not to lose stamina.

PANEL II: V4 AND EU ENLARGEMENT

Assoc. Prof. PhDr. Vít Hloušek, PhD

Department of International Relations and European Studies, Masaryk University

Mr. Hloušek said that the Visegrad four was created to fill in the political vacuum left after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in 1991. The V4 was meant to serve as an instrument that would enable the four countries to develop closer relations and cooperate in order to return to Europe as quickly as possible. The group sent out messages of stability and a willingness to overcome problems despite differences.

The Visegrad cooperation can be divided into four phrases:

1) Consolidation period: 1991-1993

During this period, both domestic as well as external pressures were in favor of cooperation of the Visegrad countries and the V4 states were willing to make an effort to approach Western partners. The group sent out messages of stability, and a willingness to overcome common problems.

2) Period of doubts: 1994-1997/1998

This period is characterized by domestic political changes, particularly by the Czech president Václav Klaus and his government's opposition to Visegrad cooperation. "He thought that the Czech Republic was the most advanced [country] among the V4 and that being part of the Visegrad group would pull the country back from joining the EU quickly," Mr. Hloušek noted. During this period the government of Mr. Vladimír Mečiar ruled in Slovakia. The generally prevailing mood within the group was that it is important to be more European than the others, and to be quicker in approaching the EU and to achieve membership status sooner than the others.

Another reason for a shift from cooperation to competitiveness within the V4 group was pressure from the international environment. In 1993, the Copenhagen criteria were introduced to measure political progress of individual candidate countries wishing to become members of the EU. In 1994, the Partnership for Peace of NATO was designed as a purely bilateral program. There were fears that a deeper cooperation between the V4 countries could be perceived

by the West as an alternative to their membership in the EU.

3) Restart of cooperation – maturity: 1998 – 2004

The year 1998 brought new political figures to power – Mr. Miloš Zeman in the Czech Republic, Mr. Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Mr. Mikuláš Dzurinda in Slovakia and Mr. Jerzy Buzek in Poland (since 1997) were more open to Central European cooperation. These domestic changes in combination with a clearer timetable for accession to the EU created a new environment of cooperation and strong determination to achieve membership in European and transatlantic structures. During this period, the V4 served as a platform for consultation of problems on which the Visegrad countries had a common view, and Slovak-Hungarian relations improved substantially.

4) New expectations and possibilities: 2005 – present

According to Mr. Hloušek, two lessons can be drawn from the 20-year-long experience of the Visegrad group:

"The symbol of communication and cooperation with each other is perhaps more important than the concrete achievements that the V4 has put in place."

Vít Hloušek

- The candidate countries wishing to join the EU are not in competition with each other. In this sense, Croatia is not competing with Turkey.
- According to Mr. Hloušek, "The symbol of communication and cooperation with each other is perhaps more important than the concrete achievements that the V4 has put in place." He noted that one of the reasons why the V4 has been successful is that it has always emanated a message that countries are able to talk about their problems and find solutions. Also, it is crucial that the V4 countries consider domestic demands as more important than external ones.

Turkey can become an asset related to the neighborhood policy and the EPI-related hardships; Turkey can be a model for these countries because of its economy.

Özgür Unal Eriş

Asst. Prof. Özgür Unal Eriş

Faculty member, Department of European Union Relations, Bahçeşehir University

With regards to the EU and the security community, enlargement is normally done to increase the security community of the Union, to create a community so that, although the member states disagree, they will not go into conflict with each other. The aim of the different enlargement processes was to increase the similarities within the Union, so that no security issues would spill over into the Union.

This trickled a bit because of some arguments. Firstly, the limits of Europe: there has been limits to the European enlargement, expressed in the phrase "absorption capacity", which is often used when referring to Turkey's accession into the EU. Secondly, the number of European non-EU countries

decreased. For instance, the Balkans is now facing a lot of social, political, economic problems and the EU is suffering the funds throughout the negotiation process. The Polish process of enlargement, for instance, dragged on. This leads to the third argument – enlargement fatigue – because the candidate countries have to face a lot of criteria. The EU faces a dilemma as they still have to do something about the countries that are neighbors to prevent the security threats that could spread to the EU – this is the logic behind the European neighborhood policy introduced in 2003.

The European Neighborhood policy (ENP) foresees privileged relationship with ENP members and EU, in the sense that these countries would have almost everything, except membership: access to EU's internal markets, identification of mutual threats (such as organized crimes and security threats) to be handled together, as well as EU values such as rule of law, democracy, human rights, stability, and security. Each individual member of ENP has its own Action Plan with EU –country. they set up the priorities and details for the relationship



according to the specific needs of each country.

Most research done of the neighborhood policy proves some disadvantages. Firstly, there is the lack of potential membership. The Eastern European states could access EU membership fast, but here it is a lack of credible EU membership. It creates an important problem of implementation because of the lack of membership prospects; it is not easy to tell your public to do something if they do not see anything credible or concrete for the future, and no seeing means no will to implement. So there is a discrepancy between rule adoption and implementation. The countries in question are adopting rules, but not implementing them as shown in progress reports of the European Commission that is monitoring the progress. Secondly, sometimes the funds are not seen as adequate because of the financial crisis that the EU is experiencing within itself; the countries are therefore having problems with achieving these neighborhood policies.

What started out as a Polish-Swedish initiative, the Eastern Partnership initiative (EPI), which was important during the Czech Republic Presidency in 2009, means gradual integration into the EU economic cooperation and stands against new security threats etc. With regards to the EPI, the lack of membership is also a problem here. Further, Russia can be problem in the region, and some of the EU

member states are not interested because they are not linked to the Eastern countries.

Turkey can become an asset related to the neighborhood policy and the EPI-related hardships; Turkey can be a model for these countries because of its economy etc. Secondly, as a very influential regional power neighboring Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, and using this experience, it can both help the EU fulfill its role and fighting security threats that may come from this region and be a model for these countries in terms of its democracy and functioning market economy.

Adam Balcer

Program Director, EU Enlargement and Neighborhood, demosEUROPA, Warsaw

Mr. Balcer maintained that the V4 group possesses administrative know-how regarding the EU accession process that can be useful to Turkey and elaborated on the V4's importance for the EU and Turkey, as well as Turkey's for the EU and the V4.

Regarding the potential capacity of the V4 group in the EU, Mr. Balcer noted that the combined population of the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary surpasses those of France or Germany. According to Goldman Sachs and other financial institutions, in the coming two decades the pace of growth of the economy of the V4 group will be one of the fastest in the EU, and will likely surpass even those of Western European states. Indeed, the GDP (PPP) of the V4 group is already larger than Spain's, and will soon bypass Italy's.

As the economies and populations of the V4 group rise, so too does its leverage. Mr. Balcer stated a crucial asset of the V4 is that it can serve as the basis for strong coalitions in the region, such as with the Baltic states, Romania and Bulgaria.



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Visegrad Group
1991–2011
years



states. While Ukraine and Belarus are considered appealing sources of immigrants for Central Europe, Mr. Balcer contended that if the Central European states only seek immigrants from these countries, potentially harmful competition would result. Instead, Mr. Balcer asserted, after its accession to the EU “Turkey will be a natural and interesting source of immigrants in the coming decades” for Central Europe.

In his concluding remarks, Mr. Balcer emphasized the strategic importance of Turkey for the EU and the V4, particularly in the Middle East. Given that Turkey has become a major stakeholder in the Middle East, its EU accession is crucial for the EU and V4’s strategic interests in the region. A Turkey within the EU would complement initiatives such as the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ “Foundation for International Solidarity,” which has the goal of spreading Poland’s expertise about democratization outside of its immediate region. However, Mr. Balcer warned that if Turkey’s EU accession process becomes a permanent stalemate, then Turkey will become a “more difficult,

Mr. Balcer then turned to the issue of Turkey-V4 relations in the context of the V4 group’s support of further EU enlargement, particularly Turkey’s EU accession. While relations between the predecessor states of the V4 countries and Turkey (the Ottoman Empire) were marked by conflict and wars, Mr. Balcer pointed out that unique cooperation and coexistence also occurred in this period, as evidenced by the centuries-old Muslim minority that continues to live in Poland. In modern times, some Poles and Hungarians played an important role in the modernization of Turkey. For example, the author Constantine Borzecki (Mustafa Celaleddin Pasha), the great-grandfather of the famous Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet, author of the book *The Turks Ancient and Modern*, was of Polish origin. Mr. Balcer argued that this shared history between the V4 countries and Turkey serves as an answer to those who use religious or cultural based arguments against Turkey’s EU accession.

In the present day, Mr. Balcer stated, cooperation in the areas of economic development and energy serve to benefit both Turkey and the V4 countries. Central Europe has promising markets, such as that in Poland, where Turkish companies are participating in a construction boom by contributing to the building of new subway lines in Warsaw, among other projects. For the V4 countries and Central Europe, Turkey is a key transit country of natural energy whose importance will further increase with the construction of the Nabucco pipeline.

On the issue of immigration, a “taboo” issue in EU and V4 countries, Mr. Balcer argued that Europe in general and Central Europe in particular will be in increasing need of immigrants given the aging populations of most of European

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Adam Balcer

reluctant and less cooperative" partner for the EU and the V4, and a more cooperative one for Russia and Iran.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

PhDr. Irena Krasnická

Consul General of Czech Republic

In her concluding remarks, Ms. Krasnická underlined the people-to-people level communication and importance of the V4 in creating relations between citizens of the V4 countries as well as between citizens of the Visegrad group and citizens of other countries. "Our generation understood very well why we need each other. We often traveled to our Visegrad neighbors, listened to the same rock bands, and our children watched the same movies, so we had a common understanding that we are brothers and we all face totalitarian regimes of the same origin," she said. She then pointed out that 20 years later, the young generation in the Visegrad countries would rather travel all around the world than to Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland or Slovakia. Yet, there are signs that the youth is still interested in getting to know more about their Visegrad neighbors. She noted that V4 funds can be used for exchanges between university students, academic staff, artists and also cooperation between municipalities. The Erasmus Program of the EU is also contributing to the increase in the number of Turkish students studying in the V4 countries and vice versa. "The students come back from their exchange and want to go again, which means that we feel fine with each other – the Turks in Visegrad countries and vice versa," she concluded.



"The students come back from their exchange and want to go again, which means that we feel fine with each other – the Turks in Visegrad countries and vice versa."

Irena Krasnická

Amb. Dr. András Gyenge

Consul General of Hungary

"Do not see us as a region of only successes and no problems," Amb. Dr. András Gyenge said in his concluding remarks. He noted that there are still complications inherited from the past, e.g. minority issues. Yet what is important is the existence of an instrument, i.e. V4, that can deal with these problems in a civilized and peaceful manner. Regional cooperation is thus important for Europe and Turkey as well, because it guarantees stability and also the future. Amb. Dr. András Gyenge concluded his speech with an address to the students at the roundtable meeting: "The future belongs to you and not to us. You will continue the story. It's very important to raise your enthusiasm, but you should continue."

"Do not see us [V4] as a region of only successes and no problems."

András Gyenge

Mirosław Stawski
Consul General of
Poland

Mr. Mirosław Stawski commented on Turkey's EU accession issue by underlining the need for finding areas of common interests in order to create dialogue between Turkey and EU countries. Mr. Stawski emphasized the importance of the V4 countries sharing their relevant experiences regarding EU accession with Turkey. While introducing the Polish approach, underlining that Turkey and Poland have historical relationships for a very long time, Mr. Stawski noted that these countries should rediscover how much they have in common. Mr. Stawski concluded his speech with pointing out the importance of the conference that was held with the cooperation of a university and hosted students along with the consul generals. According to Mr. Stawski, the most important outcome from the conference was to have spoken with a common voice.



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