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## INTERNATIONAL STUDENT CONFERENCE VISEGRAD YOUTH FORUM 2013<sup>1</sup>

**Paula Juričková\***

During the final days of April 2013 (25th – 27th), the student non-governmental organisation Euro-Atlantic Centre organised a youth conference *Visegrad Youth Forum 2013* at the Faculty of Political Science and International Relations. The main purpose of this event was to interconnect the opinions of young participants and the knowledge of invited experts on the possibilities and challenges of the V4. An innovative part of a program in comparison with the first year of the *Visegrad Youth Forum 2011 on Common Foreign and Security Policy* was an excursion to the Sliach military Air Force base, an informal evening discussion with Slovak soldiers who experienced international crisis management operations and a workshop for young participants (students from all V4 countries), during which they created their own student version of the Visegrad declaration. The main purpose of this event, however, was to stir public discussion about the importance and current position of V4. The representatives of NGOs, the public sector and academics from all V4 countries expressed their opinions in three panel discussions during the conference.

The first panel was a discussion on *The Path of Western Balkans to the Euro-Atlantic Structures*. Contributions and panel discussions came from NGO representatives Mr. **Jan Vlkovský** from Jagello 2000 Association (Czech Republic), Mrs. **Beáta Huszka**, senior research fellow from Hungarian Institute of International Affairs; Mr. **Tomasz Żornaczuk**, from Polish Institute of International Affairs and Mr. **Ján Cingel**, director of Partnership Development from Slovak Atlantic Commission.

In the beginning, the panellists introduced V4 countries and their situation

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after joining the European Union and especially the advantages of their experiences in helping with the implementation of know-how obtained in the past. The most significant contribution in the Balkans was made in the sphere of political support by introducing the cooperation of V4 countries. Other work has been done in the establishment of the West Balkan fund, sharing transition process and by high-level political meetings.

Although V4 countries are trying to help in process of transition, the enlargement of the EU is not supported enough in Germany. Only 20 % of people would like to see Balkan countries in the European Union. People participating at the discussion agreed on inevitable processes and pointed out that it had to be made in the future, such as protection of human rights in Western Balkan (minorities, cultural, language and political rights).

To complete the whole mosaic, it was necessary to discuss integration to the NATO in the Western Balkans which is a problem for countries in the social and political context of the past. Not all countries want to be a part of NATO, not all were accepted as potential candidates mainly because of several political problems, which can be solved by the industrial involvement of the EU countries, establishing a NATO trust fund and pushing the policies based on NATO values and within the framework of NATO. There is a problematic question of non-recognition by V4 countries but, on the other hand, the Western Balkan is a big opportunity and main priority for them.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> panel discussion was called *Europe at the crossroads - What is the future of the EU and Eurozone?* It concerned the EU crisis, its origins and further implications. The invitation was accepted by Mr. **Vít Dostál**, Deputy Director of the Association of International Affairs from the Czech Republic, Mr. **Paweł Zerka** a Policy Analyst of the Centre for European Strategy from Poland, and two representatives from Slovakia's - Mr. **Ján Boďa**, representative of the Department of Economic and Financial Models from the Comenius University in Bratislava and Mr. **Robert Vass**, Secretary General of the Slovak Atlantic Commission.

The debate focused on several aspects of the European Union's future in the light of the current crisis. At the beginning of the crisis in 2009 the main issue was unemployment. This issue, however, was changed in 2010 to state/government debt. At this point, states started to apply austerity measures, which led to the increase of unemployment and did not stop the growth of debt. The main goal in stopping the crisis is to create a fiscal union in order to reach common euro-debt and Eurobonds.

The panellists also emphasized the problem of youth unemployment and shadow economy. Some jobs are not official; therefore states listed those, who worked unofficially as unemployed people. The state should also reduce dualism in part time jobs, which would enable citizens to have more than one part time job. Member states also need to push for serious reforms in this policy in order to be efficient in collecting taxes and helping to increase the youth employment.

The political aspects of EU crisis are also significant. Future elections in Germany, the division of the EU and the legitimacy of decisions are all important issues. The EU needs a strong German government to further proceed in EU reforms. Germany is the leading country in this process and a future weak government could change this. In 2014, elections will take place not only in Germany (September 2013) but also to the European Parliament, in Hungary and in the Czech Republic, so this year will be crucial in case of dealing with crisis in South Europe, especially in Italy, Cyprus and Portugal. The optimistic vision is shared by the coalition formed by CDU or SPD, because new anti-European political parties were established in Germany, such as *The Alternatives*, which can gain some votes if the general opinion in Germany will change in an anti-European direction. The radicalisation of political parties as well as the public is the real threat for the EU.

The second problem – the division of EU - is connected with the EU and Eurozone. States of the Eurozone are creating a union within the union. EU members, who are not in the Eurozone, are losing their influence in monetary and fiscal issues of the EU. This could create a model of primary and secondary states inside the EU.

Other negative aspects are a two-speed Europe and slow response to the crisis. Europe's decision-makers decided to bail-out states instead of bailing-out banks (as Americans did in 2009) and pumped money into the economy and solved the crisis faster than the Europeans did.

Probably the biggest problem of the EU is the legitimacy of decisions. The EU is starting to be governed by bureaucrats, not by elected representatives. In order to bring the EU closer to its citizen, it needs to gain more legitimacy which can be delivered by more directly elected representatives in important offices within the EU.

*"Can NATO meet the challenges of the 21th century?"* was the topic question of the last panel, which was oriented to security issues.

The invitations of Euro-Atlantic Centre were accepted by Mr. **Miroslav**

**Mizera**, Advisor of the Office of the State Secretary, Ministry of Defence of the Slovak Republic, Mr. **Gergely Varga**, the Analyst of the Strategic Research Institute from Hungary, Mr. **Amb. Piotr Ogrodziński**, Senior Counsellor of Minister, Security Policy Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, and Mr. **Marian Majer**, Senior Research Fellow from the Centre for European and North Atlantic Affairs (Slovak Republic).

As for the future of NATO and its functioning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the comparison of the security situation in the current and former, bipolar world order was claimed. In the Western world NATO represented a guarantee of security until the demise of the Soviet Union. Today, the global challenges and needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century are diametrically different as they were back in those days. NATO has to respond to the new concepts of the world security actively and promptly. That is the reason why the co-operation and coordination of NATO member states during resolving new global challenges is necessary. Some of NATO's members announced their intention to cut the expenses to the defence and security sector.

The NATO summit in Chicago in 2012 was crucial to the definition and discussion of the nearest future, which will be after the withdrawal from Afghanistan. The pullout from Afghanistan and end of the ISAF mission will be the most important change of recent years for NATO. The deep crisis in European countries is weakening the will of countries to spend more resources on defence - especially „smart defence“, which is seen as a way out from this situation.

The character of the relationship between NATO as an organisation and NATO's member states is another important point which should lead to the change of the whole conception. The members should create the policy of organisation which was created to protect them and their interests more. Another potential problem for the Alliance is a different security situation and orientation of member states within the Alliance. In the context of V4 countries and the public opinion within the Visegrad Group, there is a negative approach of Poland to the Alliance. The development of the Alliance after the withdrawal from Afghanistan and current security situation in the world will shape the trans-Atlantic partnership.