



# VISEGRAD YOUTH FORUM 2018



## Going backwards? V4 at a crossroads

The panel discussion the 7<sup>th</sup> edition of the Visegrad Youth Forum took place at the Faculty of Political Science and International Relations of the Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica on December 6, 2018. Titled *“Going backwards? V4 at a crossroads”*, the discussion focused on both the current state of the V4 and its future. The panel was introduced by the keynote speech of **Marek Lenč**, *Assistant Professor at the Department of International Relations and Diplomacy of the Faculty of Political Science and International Relations of the Matej Bel University*. In his speech, he pointed out that despite the successes, which the international community is reaching, there are still many problems we need to deal with and many challenges we need to face. All Central European countries chose a Euro-Atlantic future. Our shared common goal remains – we still want to be part of the European project. That’s because the V4 shares its common interests. Despite several differences, we should show more solidarity to each other, because friends should respect each other despite different opinions and decisions. Mr. Lenč concluded his speech by saying that *“if you made a mistake and do not correct it, this is called a mistake.”*

Speaking at the discussion were **Marko Salíni**, *Secretary of the European Affairs Section at the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic*, **András Máté Lázár**, *National Visegrad Coordinator of Hungary at Department for Visegrad Cooperation and Central Europe at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary*, **Jana Juzová**, *Research Fellow at the EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy in Prague, Czech Republic* and **Jakub Groszkowski**, *Head of the Central European Department at the Centre for Eastern Studies in Warsaw, Poland*. The panel was chaired by the *Program Director of the Euro-Atlantic Center* **Michal Hežely**.

Marko Salíni began by agreeing with Mr. Lenč’s speech and especially with the main thoughts in it. Mr. Salíni thinks that the problem of populism, extremism is a problem in the entire European Union, not problem just in Central European countries. In his opinion, there aren’t any metaphorical lines between west and east, nor between south and north. As a consequence of growing populism and extremism





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in the context of next year's European Parliament elections, we will have a new parliament with new political powers included within it. He mentioned that the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic created the Department of Strategic Communication, which started the initiative *"Foreign Policy Concern Us"* (translated from *Zahraničná politika sa nás týka*). The ministry is fighting against populism and extremism through activities organized for student at universities and secondary schools because the aforementioned elections. In the previous elections, Slovakia ranked last among EU member states with a voter turnout of just 13%. Moreover, Mr. Salíni elaborated on the activities of young people and young student, and the importance of fighting against hoaxes via social media as Facebook, Twitter etc.

András Máté Lázár continued by saying that since being in Banská Bystrica for the last time 8 years ago, a lot has changed. In his view, Central European countries have a sense of self-criticism and pessimism. He compared it to a survival skill, which has developed in the region. We should stop to be critical and pessimistic, and think more optimistic, giving much more space to certain things. The situation in the region should be compared in historical perspectives or compared with other parts of Europe. Then we will see that the situation is far better than in the past. In his words, we can't ignore that tangible statistics are growing. The second thing he wanted to point out is that in region, we have political stability not only from a social but from economic perspective, too.

Domestic politics are very hard to talk about. Mentioning Hungary as an example, we shouldn't only deal with headlines that are a week old, but if we are really interested, we can see that the country overcame 8 years of complex and complicated situations. Here in Central Europe, we surely have made mistakes and still bear the burden of a prevalent heritage of socialism. Socialization of our politicians is also something what influences us. Politicians and the political culture should change in the future, yet we keep in the back of our minds that democracy isn't just institutions and political elites, but it's a state of mind of the people, which was created over a very long period. Mr. Lázár thinks that in the meantime, Central Europe is functioning properly, and therefore the region is a good place to live. Sure, we are far from being at the same level as our western European allies are, but he thinks that all governments here in the V4 are striving to be on the same level.





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There were some words used so often in the past 30 years that they risk losing their meanings. He thinks that we take them less seriously than they should be taken. As much as the economies of the V4 countries are doing very well, as much as our countries all together were successful since entering the European Union. It's also important to underline that the Visegrad Group is very successful initiative. Sometimes it's hard to see because we don't put enough attention to it, but the cooperation is very flexible and effective. Talking about integration, Mr. Lázár mentioned Schengen, the International Visegrad Fund, negotiations about the EU budget, highspeed railway connection as important initiatives between V4 countries. There are many things we can do together and that's the point of Visegrad. There are many expectations that things will be very good in the future and we should keep our minds open.

Jana Juzová joined shared the point of view of Mr. Lázár, even though she was speaking from a different position as a representative of a civil society think-tank. She agreed with many things and points the previous speakers mentioned. Cooperation of V4 countries is very valuable. But the problem is that a lot of things within the initiative are not visible. The cooperation, development, modernization and many important issues were overshadowed by the whole discussion about the migration crisis and seeking solutions on the European level. V4 countries have many specifics, e.g. historical experience, and we have something unique we can bring to the EU. But right now, it seems that the only thing that unites us is a similar attitude towards Brussels. What's important for us, what we should ask ourselves, is how we want to present ourselves. We need to find unity and a common voice on other topics and areas instead of simply blocking initiatives, which we don't agree with. The debate in Visegrad should not focus on the European politics, for example how to solve the migration crisis, but we should focus on supporting projects here in the V4. Unity in the region isn't just strong just in agreements, but in its initiatives as well. Yet, when it comes to solutions, there is no agreement. She ended by asking what the position of the V4 in the Union is, adding that it's very unclear.

Jakub Groszkowski stressed out that the image of Central Europe has changed. The majority of people in Central Europe thought that it is enough to imitate the West in order to achieve future progress. We need to find out what we really want, what kind of market or economy we want to develop. He believes that we need to find solutions for basic European problems together. We are not in the European Union





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as guests. We need to act as states and societies that know what's the best for our countries. The European Union is like a playground where everyone wants to represent their own interests. But the interests are not the same and we should realize that. Another point Mr. Groszkowski made was that it won't be easy for us to come to an agreement with our European partners. One of the biggest problems in Central European societies is that we are very much divided. He wasn't sure about the use of populism as a way how to describe our opponents. He had the impression that we often considered different opinions of other people to be populist and we consider them to be traitors, saying that we only need to look at our parliaments. When was the last time Central European parliaments agreed on something? The only thing that the governments in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary agreed on was the migration crisis – there was unified disagreement about Global compact for migration. What we need to do in Central Europe is to develop new ways of communications within our societies.

On the question, how we can stay unified while also improving our relationship with the EU, Mr. Salíni answered that V4 countries are not at the same position in many things. Even the Visegrad cooperation is a very pragmatic cooperation, but the questions about migration changed our image. We realize that we need to focus more on a pro-European agenda and to communicate with our European partners. We want to use the V4+ format as a platform for dialogue with France, Germany, BENELUX states and Baltic states. In regards to the migration crisis, we realize that we are troublemakers, but we need to communicate and discuss to change our opinions, especially about this topic. Based on the absence of a history of colonialism, we only have 5 embassies in Africa, which isn't comparable to France, Britain or Spain. Despite that, we want to take part in Africa, that's why actively contribute to the EU-Africa Trust Fund, exemplifying positive cooperation.

Western states respect us because the V4 is the only original group in Europe that holds annual meetings with Eastern Partnership countries since 2010. Another success of V4 states is the Western Balkan Fund, based in Tirana, Albania, which is inspired by the International Visegrad Fund. Mr. Lazár brought up the question what V4 can give to Europe, but stressed the need to be very careful with this question. In terms of Central European countries, we need mutual help. That's positive for common





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relations, because we speak and stand for something. On the other hand, Western states could say that Central Europeans are asking for money and they don't even behave how they should. In this regard, we seem to have taken up the role of a black sheep. But from another perspective, we are arguing for keeping a policy in the European Union, which is actually working and contributed to the economic growth not only in our region, but in Europe as well. Another example of a topic that Visegrad countries tried to bring on the table and keep on the agenda was the dual quality of products. It is important to see issues being brought up not as blocking something, but as something being advanced. We should see the opportunity in that and not to dwell on the negatives.

Mrs. Juzová sees the potential of the V4 in EU during policy debate, as the V4 has the potential to come up with interesting ideas and solutions. Even though the public is skeptical about the EU, it's skeptical in terms that the EU needs to be reformed. Concluding the discussion, Mr. Groszkowski pointed out that it's the role of national governments to please the public and majority of the people, not the EU's. V4 cooperation is limited to political cooperation between national governments. But the connection is not just between the governments, but between the people.

