

## **ANNUAL REPORT ON THE ACTIVITIES OF THE VISEGRAD GROUP (KRAKOW, 1 JUNE 2001)**

The Annual Report covering the Visegrad Group's activities in the period since the summit meeting of Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and the Slovak Republic held on 9 June 2000 in Prague was prepared by the Polish presidency. It is the second annual report on Visegrad co-operation following that published a year ago under the Czech presidency.

Over the twelve months under review contacts and co-operation among the member countries of the Visegrad Group have been developing very well in all dimensions and at all levels. This happened along the guidelines and within the political framework for co-operation established by the Heads of Government at the 1999 and 2000 summit meetings.

The year under the Polish Visegrad presidency was marked by intensive contacts and debates at high political level. Prime Ministers Jerzy Buzek, Mikulas Dzurinda, Viktor Orban and Milos Zeman met in this period several times in different settings to discuss European and regional issues remaining in the focus of the Group. Since the Prague summit they have met in October in Warsaw with the British Prime Minister, in the same month in Karlovy Vary in the Visegrad Group format, and twice in December in Bratislava with Prime Ministers of Slovenia and the Netherlands. The Heads of Government of the European Union member countries supported the objectives and efforts of the Visegrad countries undertaken with regard to an early EU accession.

Presidents Vaclav Havel, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, Ferenc Madl and Rudolf Schuster commemorated in January in the Polish town of Pszczyna the 10th anniversary of the Visegrad Declaration of 15 February 1991 marking the start of co-operation by the four nations meant to strengthen the integration processes in Europe. The Heads of State issued a joint declaration referring to the priorities of the Visegrad Group after a decade of transition in Europe.

Political objectives of the co-operation focused over the past year on promotion of the Visegrad countries' readiness for and contribution to European and Euroatlantic integration. The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia worked together and assisted each other in preparations for European Union membership. The Visegrad member states of NATO supported the Slovak Republic's efforts with regard to her membership in the Alliance. In the external dimension Visegrad states expressed their openness towards and preparedness to develop co-operation with third countries in Central, Southern and Eastern Europe. The image of the Visegrad area as of one characterized by political and economic stability was attempted to be reinforced through several forms of state-level, regional and trans-frontier co-operation reaching a number of local communities and several civil society segments.

The means of Visegrad co-operation over the last year encompassed manifold intergovernmental, parliamentary and NGO level contacts. In addition to high-level meetings, they included expert consultations on European security and integration, regional issues and policy planning. In October 2000 a meeting of directors from the ministries of foreign affairs of the Visegrad countries responsible for non-European

countries took place in Warsaw. In April 2001 the Visegrad Co-ordinators of the foreign ministries met in Warsaw and the European correspondents gathered in Prague.

Exchange of information and co-operation projects covered several dimensions reaching from justice and home affairs to culture, science and education. Diplomatic and consular representatives of the Visegrad countries in third countries met and held consultations regularly. Ministries of foreign affairs and representatives of the four states to international organizations like OSCE, Council of Europe, United Nations met to consult and to elaborate common views and positions on political issues, including on European security affairs, whereas most of the EU statements and declarations were supported. Joint statements were issued by the foreign ministries of Visegrad countries on issues like the detention of Czech nationals in Cuba and the escalation of violence in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

The priorities for Visegrad co-operation among competent ministries and institutions over the past year reflected primarily the need to get prepared for membership in the European Union. Thus, the common interest focused, inter alia, on so called third pillar issues, Schengen agreement requirements, organized crime prevention, transport infrastructure and border crossings, economic and environmental issues. The complementary dimensions of cultural co-operation, research and education, sports and youth exchange as well as local government and NGO networking have been strengthened significantly by the establishment of the International Visegrad Fund in June 2000.

At the informal meeting of Prime Ministers in Karlovy Vary in October 2000 discussions on EU enlargement scenarios took place. The "big-bang" concept was criticized as contradicting the individual approach towards candidate countries, and emphasis was put on Visegrad solidarity in the negotiation process. The Heads of Government informed each other about accession strategies of their countries in light of the expected Nice summit of the EU. They also have reached agreement on developing certain areas of Visegrad co-operation. It was considered to establish new forms of co-operation in military industry (equipment modernization) and military training (Poland offered air force facilities). Upon Czech initiative ministers of transportation were requested to examine plans for improving transport infrastructure, and Hungary offered to companies from Visegrad countries easier access to road construction projects. Slovakia informed about the adoption by government of a strategy towards application of the Schengen regime which was supported by the other countries. Respective institutions were instructed to increase joint efforts in combating organized crime in the Visegrad area. Regional gas and oil supply strategies were discussed.

As mentioned above the Visegrad Group remains open for partnership relations and co-operation with external partners. The Visegrad countries welcomed the interest of Slovenia, Croatia, Romania, Ukraine, and most recently Austria in co-operation on different projects of common sense and good prospects in the context of EU enlargement. The Visegrad Group supports different forms of regional co-operation and good-neighbourly partnership as a helpful means in the process of European integration. Therefore, also the suggestion of the Prime Minister of Belgium regarding the examination of opportunities for co-operation between Visegrad and Benelux was taken up with interest. One more example of this kind of approach towards European integration was the proposal made at the December Netherlands–Visegrad Prime Ministers' meeting by Mr. Buzek to consider the elaboration by the Visegrad four, the Netherlands, Germany, United

Kingdom and Sweden of a joint economic development programme until 2010. This initiative has been developed under the heading of “knowledge-based economy”.

Upon Polish initiative consultations were held in Warsaw in autumn 2000 between the Visegrad and Ukrainian foreign ministries on policy planning, and between Visegrad and Slovenia on South-Eastern European issues. The Swedish presidency of the European Union invited the Visegrad countries in March 2001 to consultations at the foreign ministry in Stockholm on the EU's Strategy for Ukraine. The meeting was followed by another one in Brussels. Deputy Ministers for Foreign Affairs met in April to discuss European integration and Visegrad co-operation issues and held jointly consultations on European security affairs at the State Department in Washington, D.C. Consultations of chief negotiators with the EU were held regularly in different formats.

In the parliamentary dimension meetings of the Chairpersons of the Committees for Foreign Affairs, Defence and European Integration of the national parliaments take place regularly. The 6th and most recent was held in Warsaw in December 2000. The parliamentarians discussed and welcomed the EU Nice Summit decisions and called upon the North Atlantic Council to issue invitations, not later than at the Prague NATO summit in 2002, to Slovakia, Slovenia, Lithuania and any other candidate country meeting the membership criteria.

At the October 2000 meeting of the Visegrad and Austrian Ministers of Interior in Papernicka (Slovakia) discussions focused on new mechanisms for co-operation in combating organized crime, information exchange on judicial reforms, forms of legal assistance to citizens, and the European Charter of Basic Rights. The Visegrad Group's Ministers of Justice met, too, in November in Poland (Szczyrk) to discuss their co-operation on EU's third pillar issues.

Over the last year co-operation among border police, consular departments and ministries of interior of the Visegrad Group was developed, including on matters related to the requirements of the Schengen regime.

In October 2000 (in Prague) and April 2001 (in Warsaw) two major conferences were held in the format of Visegrad and Romania upon invitations of Deputy Prime Ministers, with participation of departments of justice and interior at ministerial level and representatives of international organizations, devoted to human rights and national minorities' protection in legal and administrative terms.

The Visegrad Group developed economic links and co-operation among the member states and with third countries. It remained to be the stimulating core of the Central European Free Trade Agreement. The only barrier in the turnover of industrial products within CEFTA continued to be the quality certification. Methods of further liberalization of agricultural trade were discussed and gradually agreed within the CEFTA framework with a view to comply with EU standards.

In October 2000 the 4th meeting of Ministers of the Environment of the Visegrad countries took place in Warsaw with the participation of Sweden that put environment on the top of its EU presidency's agenda. In May 2001 the 5th ministerial meeting was held in the Slovak Republic. Environmental protection continued to remain in the forefront of Visegrad co-operation also because of its transboundary character and immediate mutual impact on the member countries, and the decline in this area over the past decades. Ministers

agreed upon a joint position on intensified activities towards ensuring environmental safety, sustainable development and climate protection, based on exchange of experience on technologies at bilateral, European and global levels as well as on governmental support for environmental initiatives and programmes. In October 2000 another meeting of Directors of Geological Surveys of the Visegrad countries took place in Zdiar (Slovakia) and a common Letter of interest signed on joining the EuroGeoSurveys organization.

Co-operation on transportation and communication issues focused over the past year on methods of liberalizing road transports, information exchange on infrastructure investment projects of transregional character (like TINA, European corridor no. 6, European Commission's concept of freeways). In October 2000 the 6th meeting of the Visegrad countries' General Directors of Railways took place in Budapest.

Transfrontier co-operation among the Visegrad four developed well over the last year. Several bilateral and multilateral euroregions gained strength and worked on new mechanisms of co-operation. Great attention was paid to the access and effective use of EU's financial assistance (including instruments like PHARE, CBC, ISPA, SAPARD). In December 2000 a new agreement on local level co-operation was signed by representatives of the Czech district of Zdar nad Sazavou, the Hungarian district of Bukki Szlovak Telepulesek Szovetsege, the Polish district of Sanok, and the Slovak district of Vranov nad Toplou. The objectives of co-operation include economic development through cross-boundary goods exchange, development of the sector of small and medium size enterprises, organization of trade fairs and exhibitions, cultural and educational activities, sports and tourism, exchange of experience in local self-government, modernization of roads, natural disaster rescue.

In October 2000 a meeting of Ministers of Culture of the Visegrad countries took place in Bratislava. The ministers decided to introduce the Visegrad Group to European cultural organizations as a consistent platform, starting with the submission to the Council of Cultural Co-operation in the Council of Europe (CDCC) of an address on the activities of the Visegrad Group. They agreed to present jointly the Visegrad Group in the area of culture in countries of the EU, making use of the existing projects and the network of cultural institutes of individual countries. Another meeting of the Ministers of Culture was held in the Czech Republic in May 2001 on the themes of media policy and cultural heritage.

Co-operation in the fields of education and science developed very well over the past twelve months, mostly through exchanges of scholars within the framework of the Central European Programme for University Studies. Bilateral governmental commissions for transfrontier co-operation assisted the exchange of primary and secondary school students in the Visegrad area. A number of expert meetings involving ministries for education took place.

Special priority is given by the Visegrad countries to the promotion of information on European integration among young people – the future leaders. Upon the initiative of the Prime Minister of Poland a number of high-school students including editors of local youth media participated in recent months in visits of the Head of Government to foreign countries, inter alia in the Visegrad format. In April 2001 a Visegrad conference was organized in Warsaw by academic youth under the auspices of the Foreign Ministers of the four countries. It is hoped that these initiatives may result in future in the creation of a Visegrad Youth Parliament.

The first year of the activities of the International Visegrad Fund established by the governments of the four countries with the aim of supporting closer co-operation, strengthening mutual ties and integrating them with the European Union proved this institution to be a successful one. Projects under implementation reached from EU enlargement and human rights seminars, over handicapped people sport games, youth leadership symposia and think-tanks co-operation, the establishment of agricultural webs and ecological networks, to journalism and literary evenings, concerts and theatre performances. The interest of applicants from across the Visegrad region in IVF co-sponsorship of projects encouraged the governments to reconsider the amount of annual contributions to the fund (current budget of one million euro). Since its establishment in June 2000 the Czech Republic followed by Poland presided over the IVF's decision making-bodies well supported by the fund's Slovak Executive Director. As of 1 January the Slovak Republic took over the IVF chairmanship.

The Visegrad Group is a well-identifiable structure both in member countries and in the international environment. The interest of other countries who seek to participate in Visegrad activities seems to prove this statement. The underlying principle for the Visegrad co-operation is solidarity. The added value of Visegrad is bringing regional co-operation down to the civil society level. The Visegrad Group has become a symbol for successful political and economic transition in the central part of Europe. Judging upon the number of high-level meetings in the so called 4+1 format it is perceived by European Union member states as an important forum for discussion of the challenges of European integration. The voice of Visegrad is heard in Europe.

The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and the Slovak Republic pledge their readiness to continue and to deepen the Visegrad co-operation in recognition of the convergence of their strategic goals and common challenges ahead of them.

At the meeting of the Heads of Government of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and the Slovak Republic taking place in Cracow on 1 June 2001 Hungary takes over the presidency of the Visegrad Group for the year 2001/2002.

[Quelle: [http://www.visegrad.org/annual\\_cont.php?stranka=2001](http://www.visegrad.org/annual_cont.php?stranka=2001)]