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## **The Visegrad Group between Identity and Post-Socialist Transition** ***Relations with the EU and contemporary crisis***

*Visegrad Group Conference. V4 for students*

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On February 17, 2016, the Town City Hall of Forlì hosted an important event that saw the participation of the Ambassadors in Italy of the four countries composing the so called Visegrad Group (V4) - a loosely institutionalized regional cooperation constituted by Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia to manage their common goals.

The institutional greetings of the Major – Davide Drei – opened the talks, focusing on the importance of such an event to reflect and discuss about fundamental values and international issues, stressing the relevance of the University and its invaluable role in connecting generations and society. Briefly followed the interventions by Felix San Vicente Santiago, Dean of the Forlì Campus, and Francesco Privitera, Director of the MIREES joint-degree program. In recalling the concomitant occurrence of the 25th anniversary since the foundation of the Campus and the V4, both highlighted the multiple ties that link Eastern Europe with the University of Bologna and Forlì in particular. Indeed, a particular vocation and interest towards this area were present since the beginning, as testified by the creation and permanence of the MIREES programme. Alongside University, the PECOB portal attracts area-experts from all over the world to offer sound fundamental and applied research over a wide range of socio-economic and political issues regarding Eastern-Central Europe and the Balkans. An important contribution was also given by the Visegrad Chair – a V4 funded educational opportunity that increases the internationalization of University by providing an added value to the academic offer.

Just before the speeches of the Ambassadors there was space to recall the heroic figure of Alexander Dubcek. Defined as “an intelligent man, rigorous, and mild”, he can be considered as the perfect example of the strength of the individuals in changing their own destiny, beyond the constrictions and instability of present times. It’s in these moral and political qualities that the ideals and practices of the Visegrad countries can be found.

The conference developed around a macro theme: the perceptions of the V4 countries within the European Union, especially in terms of integration and external policy.

During the conference, the EU has been unanimously depicted as a milestone in freedom and peace, and a turning-point for post-socialist transition. Particularly, from the interventions of the Ambassadors, mobility emerged as a symbol of stability, peace and freedom among European countries, and a core value in the Union that needs to be preserved. Particularly felt by the V4 is the freedom of movement within EU borders, whose protection, alongside other universally-recognized human rights, is considered as fundamental and as important for younger generations as for older ones. In this regard, H.E. Hana Hubáčková - Ambassador of the Czech Republic in Italy –

emphasized the role played by Bologna University in providing high levels of education both in Italy and Europe, stressing the importance of university as an instrument to solve cross-border challenges, in building cultural understanding and in promoting dialogue and discussion.

However, the turbulent times we live in force the EU to face serious challenges. The threats coming from the outside such as growing terrorism, regional instabilities, numerous conflicts in the Middle East and in the neighboring regions also constitute an internal threat for the European stability. The EU is in fact internally hit by imbalances and by a strong political crisis, among which the actual (even if not so recent) problems with the membership of UK and the migration crisis - an issue that will be recalled also later on. Ambassador Hubáčková stressed several times how the role played by the V4 countries is to promote an EU integration, together with the preservation of Schengen, since “a step-back to national arrangements could not be possible”.

The responses to these challenges have been varied and sometimes contradictory, alternating calls to cohesion and integration with the absence of effectiveness, as briefly pointed out by H.E.s Péter Paczolay and Jàn Šoth - Ambassadors of Hungary and the Slovak Republic in Italy, respectively. If a strategy for escaping from these challenges could be found in a more practically-oriented reference to the above mentioned principles, not only to be recalled in an empty lip service to treaties but concretely used as a guide for action, H.E. Tomasz Orłowski - Ambassador of Poland in Italy - reminded the theoretical and practical importance of EU’s motto “united in diversity”. He also reminded of the occurrence of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary from the signing of the Treaty of Rome - founding treaty of the European Economic Community - calling for a renewed effort for the EU to cooperate by putting together the different voices and identities that give life to a common European identity. This, according to Ambassador Orłowski, would be the guarantee of successful negotiation. Ambassador Šoth shared the positions of his colleagues by agreeing that V4 represents a development in security for the whole continent, especially for Central Europe, stressing once again the need to self-preserve the Central European regional identity, following the same premises of 25 years ago.

The reasoning behind the creation and the essence of the V4 was traced back by Ambassador Hubáčková to the ideas of Vaclav Havel and Lech Wałęsa and their work towards the preservation of peace in Europe. Certainly, it was said, V4 still has to further improve its structure and praxis, but undeniable is the success it had in avoiding the creation of superfluous institutions. Being close to what can be theoretically defined as an informal regime, the V4 has only one institution - the Fund - through which to finance its projects. Apart from this, its action is based on inter-governmental methods of decision making, and thus on the debate among its four Members on each issue to concert and coordinate a single line of thought and strategy. This allowed the V4 to develop a high flexibility in establishing different levels of dialogue that until now has allowed these States to efficiently sustain their positions especially within the EU, to the benefit of which V4 efforts are said to be “fully devoted”.

The primary and original goals of this regional arrangement were to help its narrow circle of Members to gain membership in the two main institutions that in the immediate post-Cold War period symbolized the “return to the West”: the EU and NATO. The stress was particularly put on the former, an aim which was successfully accomplished also thanks to some cooperative arrangements *à la* Monnet - as the CEFTA - preliminarily taken to facilitate the process of European integration. However, as Ambassador Šoth specified, the reasons for such a close

collaboration are not to be found exclusively in institutional objectives or in mere geographical closeness: more than this, V4 is a specific feature of the Central European identity shared among its member States. In this sense, V4 experience has a wider scope: it represents not only rational interests but also emotions and identities in international politics, common cultural and institutional heritages, psychological traits; in other words, it could be identified as a guarantee for ontological security, a tool through which to maintain the original cultural peculiarities of the group against the influences of the international system and society.

This, of course, does not mean that V4 is an “island in the sea” - in Ambassador Paczolay’s words: the desire to preserve Central European particularism does imply any willingness either to put forward decisions taken *a priori* or, on the contrary, to accept imposed solutions from others. Thus, we should say, V4 experience can be defined as one of “practical solidarity”, as such strongly European, but counterbalanced by the cultural and historically-given necessity to preserve the regional self-perception and the identity needs of these four States.

Predictably, the most debated issue that inevitably came out during the Q&A session regarded the migration crisis. The debate showed on the one hand the openness to discussion of V4 countries, but revealed also their independent approach. Especially for Poland and Hungary, it seems that the protection of external borders should proceed in parallel with the resolution of the crisis at its very origin - i.e., in the Middle East -, which is not a mere and passive acceptance of EU directives. The position of Ambassador Orłowski regarding migration was shared by all the Ambassadors, underlining the difficulty of their countries to welcome indiscriminately refugees, both for structural and cultural reasons, but also as a way to preserve the internal equilibrium they reached after 1991 and later with the EU membership.

This reflects also the profound attachment in the former socialist space to the concept and reality of Schengen’s external borders. Since V4 countries lived for decades within closed borders, for them Schengen is much more than simply free movement of goods, people, services, and capitals within the EU: it is the essence of Europe. In this sense, to open to an uncontrolled migration process - or a process only formally regulated and resolved with the imposition of quotas upon those who are not ready to accept them - would be a self-inflicted defeat by the EU: a catastrophe which would bring again to life internal (physical) divisions and - in their view - a return to the past.

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