

Challenges to Visegrad's Democracy Assistance: Ukraine and Beyond

Support of civil society in Ukraine is essential for the country's successful transition.



"We are on a dividing line between two worlds – one is paying attention to the importance of democratic values, the other vision of the world is paying attention to very different values," said **Petér Balázs**, Director of the Center for EU Enlargement Studies (CENS) and former Hungarian foreign minister, in his opening remarks at the roundtable discussion held by the Forum 2000 Foundation and CENS on May 14, 2015 in Budapest. Participants discussed outcomes of the second phase of the **Visegrad Platform for Dialogue on Democracy, Human Rights and Civil Society**, focusing on the future role of the V4 in democratic assistance in Ukraine.

Jan Hornát, Forum 2000 analyst and the author of the policy paper summarizing the outcomes of a two-part workshop that took place during the annual Forum 2000 Conference in October 2014, spoke about the changing attitudes of the individual V4 countries toward the war in Ukraine: "In February/March last year the V4 was very active, issuing a number of joint statements claiming a joint approach. However, once the third round of sanctions to Russia were discussed within the EU, the Visegrad Group became divided over the issue of Ukraine – it was not about the countries' stance on the future of Ukraine anymore, but about maintaining economic relations with Russia."



Discussing the structure of the EU democracy support in Ukraine, he pointed towards the discrepancy in the way the EU Special Measure financial help to Ukraine is divided: "out of the total 365 million Euros, 355 Million Euros is spent on capacity building through the State Building Contract – whilst only 10 million on building civil society" and noted that despite the V4 internal incoherence, supporting civil society might be where they could work jointly.

In response to Hornát's remarks, **Yevhen Hlibovytsky**, Founder of Ukrainian think tank pro.mova, asked: "Do we help civil society or the government in Ukraine? We should build the capacity of civil society to build the government." He further explained that in order to reevaluate our understanding of "what is happening on the ground in Central Asia – meaning both in Ukraine and other former Soviet states – we need more expertise, think tanks, academics, and diplomats being involved with these issues."

Regarding the feeling of insecurity that the Ukrainian crisis has brought to the Visegrad Group countries for the first time in 25 years, he argued that due to "the proximity [which] allows the V4 to see something that is not seen from Brussels, London, and other decision making centers, if the V4 can help in the East, it will become very valuable in Brussels."



Head of the Department of International Development Cooperation at Hungary's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, **Tímea Huber**, said that: "Hungary supports Ukraine's road to EU accession and is ready to help on the way." This is also manifested by the fact that 26 percent of Hungarian annual Official Development Aid in 2014 was sent to the country. Ukraine is one of the top priorities for her department, which supports programs in education, health care, community buildings, and environment savings in the country.

"What we can change is how the people in the East of the country will look at the West of Ukraine –they need to see some positive development and we deeply believe that civil society is absolutely key," stated **Šimon Pánek**, the head of People in Need, which has been supporting positive civil society trends on the ground since 2008. He also warned that help should be more involved on the ground and go deeper into the problems: "we should offer advocacy exchanges and people that will be able to work within the Ukrainian NGOs – this is not possible without spending a longer time, months, in the country."

Zsuzsanna Végh, Research Assistant at CENS, endorsed the claim from Hornát's policy paper that V4 countries need to clearly formulate why they should support the democracy assistance policy as a part of their foreign policy and as such, before they export it abroad. For as the level of commitment to democratic values in V4 societies gives cause for concern, V4 governments should upkeep the democracy support at home as well. She also expressed a concern for the future of the Internal Visegrad Fund (IVF) in case the internal divide within the Visegrad Group continues: "I am not convinced that if the democracy promotions narrative is shaken it will not affect the IVF."



In the following discussion Petér Balázs warned that we need more strategic thinking about our involvement in Ukraine and our stance towards Russia because, in the future, the EU and NATO might be challenged by other "giants."