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**SFPA**  
Slovak Foreign Policy Association

## **Strengthening Cooperation among Research Institutes of V4 Countries for the Development of a Political, Economic and Security Strategy on Central Asia**

The workshop, organised on 26-27 October in Budapest by the Center for Central Asian Studies of Corvinus University brought together researchers and representatives of ministries of foreign affairs of V4 countries. The workshop was part of a project financed by the Visegrad Fund.

As keynote addresses reminded, the motto of the Hungarian V4 Presidency was “V4 connects.” In this spirit the Hungarian Presidency fully supported the objectives of the workshop, a better understanding of the role of Central Asia in building the economic corridors that connect the eastern and western parts of the Eurasian continent. Central Asian countries are willing to work with the European Union, and within it the V4 countries. Trade, business and investment are among the main areas where such cooperation produces tangible results. It is important, too, to develop partnership structures with Central Asia, through which experiences of transition – even bad experiences and failures as lessons to be learned – could be shared and discussed. Not less important is to share the experience of regional cooperation. The V4 group is an excellent example how sub-regional groups can effectively formulate and promote their interests within larger integration processes.

The workshop started with a broad overview of the development of Central Asian countries since 1991. After an inevitable economic slump that followed the birth of five independent states, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan consolidated their independence and achieved solid economic growth. Still they face a multitude of challenges, from governance problems to religious extremism. They need to tackle these challenges in a rapidly changing geopolitical environment. The main drivers of this change are China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Russian Federation's wish to expand the Eurasian Economic Union. While the BRI might bring much needed investment, it is yet to be seen if it is going to be implemented in a transparent manner, respecting the economic interests of Central Asian countries. Research establishments of V4 countries should closely monitor the implementation of BRI in Central Asia as it helps understand how the Initiative relates to the economic, political and security interests of the European Union.

Representatives of the V4 countries presented Central Asia policies of their governments, including political, economic and cultural relations as well as research and educational cooperation. Participants then discussed how China invests in parallel, in certain aspects competing transport corridors through Central Asia and Central- and Eastern Europe and the need to identify – though research cooperation – shared interests of V4 and Central Asian countries and develop policy options and recommendations, V4 countries should actively participate in the development and implementation of the new Central Asia Strategy of the European Union as part of their effort to participate on an equal footing in the implementation of BRI.

The workshop conducted a detailed analysis of the security challenges faced by the Central Asian region. The discussion focused on indicators of economic development, governance and the functioning of democratic institutions. Participants noted a discrepancy between the relatively high marks given to some countries by a variety of organisations monitoring human rights and the functioning of democratic institutions and the rather poor economic performance of the same countries. Do the indexes developed by western organisations accurately measure how effectively the political system of a country facilitates the election of governments that provide the best (economic) governance and the broadest possible supply of public goods? It was proposed to launch a research programme by V4 and Central Asian universities and think-tanks to analyse the transition experience of these countries, focusing on the distorting effects of the different speed of change of the political and economic systems and societies. Such a study could shed new light on the root causes of the less than fully effective functioning of political systems, e.g. the permanent or temporary weakening of checks and balances or corruption.

Participants heard a broad presentation on regional and sub-regional cooperation in Central Asia, encompassing integration initiatives by the Russian Federation, China's BRI, looser frameworks with the participation of other neighbors like Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan as well as participation in international organizations, like the OSCE and cooperation with international development banks. Participants identified a several reasons (lack of complementarity among economies, disputes over water resources, border and minority problems, etc.) that explain the low level of integration within the Central Asian region. The growing influence of China and the efforts by the Russian Federation to expand the Eurasian Economic Union, together with diminishing ties to the European Union and the United States render the traditional "multi-vector foreign policy" of Central Asian states less and less effective. The possible impacts of the ongoing war and security threats emanating from Afghanistan were also mentioned. Under these circumstances it is important to identify shared interests of Central Asian countries and find new drivers for regional cooperation. The experience of V4 countries, their ability to

define and promote the interests of their sub-region within a broader integration process, might offer useful examples for Central Asia.

A detailed and substantive discussion took place on the most effective ways to develop V4-Central Asia research and education cooperation, including a proposed network through which, on the one hand, V4 countries could share their experience of political and economic transition with their Central Asian partners and on the other hand, improve their knowledge of political, economic and social developments in the region. Such cooperation would also offer an opportunity to closely monitor implementation of China's BRI in Central Asia and conduct joint research on shared challenges like terrorism and migration.

Participants agreed to invite researchers from Central Asian partner institutes and universities to the second workshop of V4 research institutes to take place in February in Budapest, possibly before the proposed ministerial meeting of V4 and Central Asian countries.

Participants agreed to prepare and publish a policy paper by next summer, summarizing the main outcomes the two workshops.