



Sharing the Experiences of Visegrad Cooperation in the Western Balkans and the EaP Countries

----- Assessment -----

Project Hosting and organizing authority:
International Centre for Democratic Transition (ICDT)

Introductory Remarks.

This paper has been designed to provide a response after the completion of a two year project to assist the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership Countries, commonly known as GUAM countries, with the transferring and sharing of experiences with the Visegrad (V4) Countries. This project was jointly supported and financed through the EEA Norwegian Financial Mechanism and the Visegrad Fund.

Structure of the Project.

The project was introduced in March 2009 in a preparatory meeting of experts and an opening workshop to a selected group of (over 40) people by the ICDT team. Nine of the participants were preselected to represent as experts in the key topics of the project. The four topics were covered in inter-regional workshops in different cities of the project region: Regional Security and Confidence Building in Kiev, October 2009; Economic Cooperation in Tbilisi, March 2010; Cross Border Cooperation in Chisinau, June 2010 and Civil society organizations in Regional cooperation in November 2010. The final closing conference was held in Budapest, March 2011 to sum up the work of the four regional workshops and set directions and project objectives for the future.

This project was brilliantly designed to involve a large representation of people from all regions and political, economic and societal backgrounds. All workshops had a selected list of invited guests, some of them as speakers on the particular topics related to the core theme of the workshops. Having a pre-workshop document distributed to participants called; "food –for thought" not only informed the participants with general description of the particular topic but on the other hand provided light on the particular issues in the region. Another well thought out plan was to select the sites of the workshops in different cities of the regions Kiev, Tbilisi and Chisinau in the Eastern Partnership Countries and Sarajevo in the Western Balkans. The organizers were very flexible in setting up the locations as Baku and/or Skopje could also have been selected. Consideration was given as to which would be the best site for participation and project impact. If one reviews all of the lists it can be detected that for each workshop the invited guests were representatives with





political positions and/or economic and social positions. They had the ability to make decisions and influence changes in their field of work and in their country. There was a regular representation of members of V4 countries whose role was to share their experiences and reflect on the changes which occurred in the Visegrad countries on the way to becoming members of the European Union. Most of the participants in these workshops had multi-level expertise to share, based on their achievement in their fields and careers. As the writer of this assessment was not part of assisting and selecting the participants it can be only assumed that it was a team task to do so but whoever did it achieved the goal of having expert representation in every workshop covering the main topics of the events. Similarly it was well thought out who should be main presenters in every workshop, covering the topics and keeping in mind that several presentations needed to be focusing on the Visegrad country experiences.

Keeping the focus on the success of the workshops without going into details on the achievement of the selected topics it can be stated that some of the presentations provided very realistic or even bleak pictures. The real issues were not hidden and opened up regional concerns such as "Visa Issues". On some borders lack of cross border cooperation caused concern. On the other hand the direction became positive looking at examples of success stories in other regions. In every workshop regardless of the topic and difficulties discussed, the objectives were to search out solutions.

In building the structure of the workshops it was a very valuable example of a cooperative democratic approach. Experts and other selected workshop participants were asked to comment on the specific topics, structure and format of the upcoming event to indicate if it will fit the topic objectives. There were often last minute revisions made to the agenda to meet the needs of an individual speaker or allow the best impact on the topic by shifting presentations.

It was also evident in the early stage of the project that the workshop participants felt the title of the project should be changed from Transferring Experiences of Visegrad to Sharing Experiences of Visegrad Cooperation in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership Countries. These changes were executed. The term "GUAM countries" was also used less and less and was replaced by the more descriptive or up to date term "Eastern Partnership Countries". These two and several other small examples indicate the flexibility of the ICDT project organizers who activated these changes for the benefit of the project and to provide clarity on terminology.

Staying on the discussion of the agenda format it was very beneficial to have regional workshop sessions and group discussions on the final day or day and a half where in-depth discussion could take place involving all participants and possibly set objectives for the future. On the other hand in some of the workshops it was felt that the topics are winding down and the participants started to "phase out" or leave the workshop earlier. It may be beneficial for a future project organized by ICDT to close the workshops or conferences with a much more "up-beat" event.

Impact and Achievements.

Although in previous paragraphs reference was made to the success of the two year project specifics will be highlighted in this section.





The most significant achievement of this project was to bring together people from three different regions to tackle four significant issues which could stand in the way of economic growth, regional security, border crossing and growth of civil society....

The key words were during all workshops; *cooperation, sharing experiences, democracy building and assistance*. The presentations not only provided facts but looked at alternative solutions and offered assistance. Representatives from countries who shared common problems finally offered joint cooperation aiming for practical solutions.

Experts, who went through the difficulties and often trauma of solving the problems in their own country or the challenge of becoming members of the European Union freely shared their experiences of “What worked and what did not” in the long process of transition.

Even in some workshop sessions when issues became very personal, viewing the same concerns from regional and national points in the Western Balkan, the reality sets in that one is not alone searching for solutions. It can be stated that the impact of opening up the real issues resulted in the realization of the need for cooperation. Networking started to develop between people and agencies. Towards the last workshop and at the closing conference not only cooperation but collaboration took place. Participants began to volunteer their knowledge and expertise and time to work together. Probably the greatest achievement and the most practical step to the future in the tri-lateral cooperation was the possible commitment of start-up funds and expertise offered by the Visegrad Fund to begin to work towards establishing the Western Balkan Fund. To accomplish this the leadership will be coming from the ICDT organization. The concept was also introduced and debated in a closing workshop session of the Eastern Partnership countries.

Future Project(s).

It is evident that the “Sharing Experiences of Visegrad Cooperation in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership Countries” achieved its goal and objectives that the project set out to do. A project like this involving a high level of expertise, sharing presentations and valuable documentation, offering possible solutions began cooperation and joint work but left unfinished business.

The work needs to be continued not only in the field of establishing Balkan and Eastern Partnership Funds which will assist the Civil Society development and democracy building but in the other areas where this project led the regions to consider. Unemployment and the downturn of economy in fringe regions require collaborative activities and solutions which involves the necessity of extended cross border cooperation. There are examples involving developments in Transnistria and many others which are requiring a longer term of fruition and years of development with leadership provided by ICDT in these projects.

It is recommended that a new project be developed with definite plans to work towards solutions to deal with the major issues presented in the four workshops and opening expert meeting and closing conference. Specific “task groups” should be established to assist with the issues of Regional economic development; Regional security & cross-border cooperation; Civil Society Development and Western Balkan Fund development and possibly assisting with the development of the Eastern Partnership Fund. Some members





of these “task groups” would be invited from the participants of this previous project. Their role would be to jointly work towards policy development, influencing governments, assisting agencies in a collaborative way to initiate change in the region. The Visegrad experience where it is applicable still would be utilized to provide direction. In the process of expansion of the project affiliation or collaborative work would be recommended with other organizations in the same field and region. To use an example in Cross Border Cooperation the Norwegian and other Scandinavian countries experiences would be utilized. Another example is available in reviewing the activities of the Association of European Border Regions such as the border youth seminar being held in August 2011 along the Finnish border in Lappeenranta . Connection could be strengthened with the Institute for Stability and Development which also developed border dialogue in the region establishing the European Forum for Cross – Border Cooperation in the Wider Europe in October 2010. Organizations in Spain and Ireland are also working on urgent cross border issues. Civil Society Development is a burning issue in the Western Balkans to reach democratization and also a great concern in the Caucasus countries namely Azerbaijan nurtured by the Center for Economic and Social Development (CESD). A study on “Policy Analysis in Azerbaijan” is provided in the attachment . Without going into further details of a new project proposal it is very evident that the achievement of the” Sharing of Experiences” program would be unfinished without taking the next step forward with a new project. The next ICDT project could be to bring these issues into action by influencing governments to establish policies to provide solutions nationally and regionally.

Closing statement.

In closing the writer of this short assessment is very appreciative that he could be part of this worth- while project which opened the door to deal with urgent issues in the region of Central, South East and Eastern Europe for countries in transition and/or on the way to become members of the European Union.

At ICDT, full credit goes to the initiator of this project, Sandor Koles, Senior Vice President for Programs and Development and Katerina Ivanova , project assistant, along with the support staff for making this project a success professionally and socially.

Report compiled by:

Csaba Lorinczi,
 Consultant
 Community Education and Development
 GlobeEd Services.
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