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The Visegrad Four and the Western Balkans: Framing Regional Identity

Time: Friday, 16. october 2020, 08:45-17:00

Location: Mirror Hall, Andrassy University Budapest, H-1088, Budapest, Pollack Mihály tér

On the 16 October 2020 the final event of the project "Understanding Identities and Regions – Perspectives on V₄ and WB" took place as a live event at the Andrassy University Budapest. On this occasion the newly published book "The Visegrad Four and the Western Balkans: Framing regional identities", was launched. The book's analyses of case studies of regional and national identities in both macro-regions of the V₄ and the Western Balkans presented the backdrop of the conference.

The conference started with some welcoming words by the Vice-Rector of the Andrassy University Budapest, Ellen Bos, who expressed her delight to meet colleagues, guests and students in person, rather behind a computer screen, as it has become normal these days.

Christina Griessler (netPOL, Andrassy University Budapest) presented the background and the results of the project. She highlighted the significant contrast between the V₄'s initial idea of regional cooperation and the reality of the fractured complexity of the Western Balkans. Focusing on the differences in the Western Balkans neglects the sense of regional belonging and the association with a cultural "Yugosphere". Griessler underlined the constructivist approach of identity, highlighted the difference between ethnic and civic identity and put emphasis on the negative effects of arbitrary categories that force those who are excluded from one category into the other.

Adam Bence Balazs (Graduate Institute, Geneva) talked about the V₄, a region in Europe, that has become another name for a region *against* Europe. The example of Poland and Hungary does affect negatively Western Balkan prospects, as some founding members might hesitate to let in new countries that do not always play according to the rules. Nevertheless, inner borderlands are positive examples of regional cohesion revealed as a complex, multi-level process. The Yugoslav wars of the 1990's show how a European set of events connects to the global scene, to other major conflicts that took place in the direct aftermath of the Cold War as well. The regional level might be a concentric circle that helps connecting Europe to the contemporary, non-Eurocentric world.

Aliaksei Kazharski (Comenius University, Bratislava) presented the missing link of the book, i.e. the Slovak case in the V₄. After explaining the historical background and sketching the main lines of the young country's political culture, Kazharski focused on the turn Slovakia has taken since the election of Zuzana Čaputová as president of the Slovak Republic in March



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2019. The country is now in a political process aimed at taking distance from the V₄ as a label and a negative reputation. The Slovak case appears as an exception within the V₄, however it remains to be seen, if it leads to a more pro-European establishment on the long term.

Zoltán Pogátsa (University of West Hungary, Sopron) brought constructive criticism to the project and sketched some lines regarding how to continue what was have started with this book. First, he acknowledged the double deconstruction carried out in the book. The authors did not only criticize national identity, but also kept an eye on the delusions of European integration, the European idea and dream as such. Second, he reflected on the regional level by recalling that Europe as a whole is, seen from abroad, a rather microscopic reality. This helps in taking the measure of local conflicts – not to ignore them, but to have a firm grasp of their importance in order to overcome them. Third, Pogátsa insisted on the exclusiveness of national identitarian narratives. He put emphasis on the possibility of other potential identities, especially socio-economic ones. Hence, he opened the discussion to new alternatives from the regional and the identitarian point of view.

The discussion that followed closed the live part of the event. During the discussion the fact was highlighted that mobility remains a privilege in Europe and that many Europeans are still not “European” in the normative sense. National identity does its – purported – exclusiveness to the fact that nations are like great novels: noble stories people can easily identify with. However, identification reduces the critical distance required for understanding the past, analysing the present and sketching future European perspectives on the local, the regional, and the continental level, knowing that Europe’s place and role in global complexity is still to be framed and remains a major challenge for the Old Continent.

The authors of the book were invited to join an online-discussion in the afternoon to discuss two main questions: Firstly, the suggestion that the V₄ is a region within Europe, which is opposing Europe, and secondly, why the term of the “Western Balkans” still has a negative connotation. Both themes were implicitly present in contributions by the authors, but not explicitly addressed. The hosts made an attempt to focus the discussion on these two aspects. In conclusion of the conference and the online-discussion the issue of identity, constantly changing and effected by internal and external influences, remains a topic of research in the regions for the years to come.

At the end of the event both conference organisers thanked the authors for their cooperation throughout the project and the International Visegrad Fund for the financial support.



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Welcome by the Vice-Rector Prof. Ellen Bos (Andrassy University Budapest)



Presentation by Christina Griessler (netPOL, Andrassy University Budapest)



Presentation by Adam Bence Balazs (Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, Switzerland)



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Presentation by Aliaksei Kazharski Aliaksei Kazharski (Comenius University, Bratislava)



Presentation by Zoltan Pogatsa (University of West Hungary, Sopron)



Discussion with guests and audience: Christopher Walsch (Corvinus University, Budapest)



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Discussion with guests and audience: Aliaksei Kazharski (Comenius University, Bratislava)



Live audience



Live audience



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Live audience