

Visegrad Summer School 2012 at the Villa Decius Association

This year marked the eleventh time when experts, students, academics, professionals and others passionate about issues related to the Visegrad Group came to the Villa Decius Association in Krakow. This year's participants represented eleven different countries, but after two weeks of co-operation, this interesting cultural blend became one harmonious melting pot. The time everyone spent together illustrated how valuable it is to exchange views and learn from one another. This time also promoted the idea that the building of a transnational agreement is not an empty slogan.

A good beginning makes a good ending

It was Sunday, a few minutes before 8:00 a.m., when the first participants of the Visegrad Summer School 2012 appeared at the door of the hotel "Za kolumnami." It was the delegation from the Czech Republic who first signed the empty attendance list, which later – slowly but steadily – filled up with various names until 5:30 p.m. Finally, all together, like a big class trip, we boarded the bus to go, for the first time, to a place that became our "second home" for the next two weeks – the Villa Decius. An organisational meeting went smoothly and was conducted in a relaxed atmosphere; everyone became familiar with each other and went on reconnaissance. The plan for the evening was clear and simple – watch the Euro 2012 Football Final in the Fan Zone on Błonia Park and of course strengthen our international integration! Although not all the faces were familiar, the distinction between "us" and "others" proved to be extremely easy, due to the VSS files with gadgets and materials that each participant had been provided with at the initial meeting. There was no end to kindness and smiles on display, even though not all of us were happy that the Spaniards won the championship. Our first evening together was definitely a success and it set a positive tone for the next thirteen days of the 2012 Visegrad Summer School.

Everybody's here

Monday marked the official launch of the VSS 2012. It was at the empty stairs of the "Za kolumnami" hotel where I met the first participant, the only representative from Slovenia – Ambrož Vuga, a man soon to be hailed as the "king of the School". When the space in front of the building started slowly filling up with a formally dressed crowd, we decided it was high time to get on the bus and officially start the 2012 Visegrad Summer School. To begin with we were treated to a formal lecture by Jan Lityński, who commemorated Vaclav Havel. Most students were well acquainted with the biography of the former Czech President, but still, the lecture by Mr. Lityński, conducted from the perspective of his personal experience, was

something that was both interesting and refreshing. Once the lecture had concluded, next up for the day came a captivating debate on the presidency of the European Union, led by representatives of the governments of all four Visegrad countries. Though our schedule was tight, we still found some time for a traditional annual family photo.



The organisers cleverly decided to assist the group integrate together and filled our first night together with integration workshops. The first task which students had to face was to present a message, a piece of news or interesting information about themselves to the group. We could hear personal mottos, calls for respect for nature, invitations to have fun together, but undoubtedly the star of the task was a Slovak, Michal Demo, whose message "I'm single" became memorable to all the women attending the Summer School. The tutors conducting the workshops took great care to change the composition of the groups after each task. There was no cheating or staying in the same, safe and already well-known surrounding – communication above all! The terrace was buzzing with talk, in turns: in large and small groups and in the end in pairs. Stormy conversations were broken by almost kindergarten-like games, cut-outs, and drawing exercises. Slowly, every group saw "special individuals" emerge – people who would become the life and soul of the party and crowd entertainers. This exercise truly reinforced the idea of cooperation and interaction and it certainly was the spark which lit the fuse on the Visegrad Summer School 2012 whereby a community of people now came into existence.

Time for brainstorming

Tuesday saw the beginning of the real Visegrad Summer School, the beginning of lectures, workshops, debates, the time when the true potential of our participants was revealed. Activities covered a broad range of subjects starting with politics and ending with culture, ecology, and even international relations. This plethora of issues allowed everyone to find something they were familiar with and showed how wide and diverse the spectrum of interests of each participant truly was and how high their level



of curiosity and knowledge of each issue would become. Lecturers were doing their best to cope with hard and well-thought-out questions, often devoting their free time to long conversations in the hall, on the loggia, or at the table with coffee. Some lectures provoked brainstorming, some of which led to the occurrence of lively conversations, lasting until the closing days of the School. We were often observing with both surprise and admiration, how dedicated to European issues the participants were and equally how important the current fate of the Visegrad Group and Europe was to them. This attitude was also greatly appreciated by the experts, who repeatedly stated that the level of commitment and sophistication of questions asked allowed them to think about the future with optimism and hope. They also encouraged young people to engage in further co-operation after the culmination of the VSS.

We're also no strangers to creativity

The afternoon marked the first workshops of the event for the participants. The participants were divided into three groups: public presentations, political identity and a photography group. In the Lubomirski family room at the Villa, the "public presentations" group began their assignment, the first question posed was about their individual



expectations for the workshops, the participants' attitude and their reasons for choosing this workshop. Some of them answered: "I do not know what to expect," some said: "I do not expect anything, because this group was not my first choice." Most, however, expected Joanna Pająk, the leader; to explain to them how to make public appearances, deliver speeches clearly and how to present yourself in the best possible

way. While it may sound serious, these workshops were both useful and interesting and of immense benefit to all partaking in them. We debated most topical subjects such as Euro 2012; we created our own advertising campaigns (tongue in cheek: "We had to create an anti-alcohol campaign, but instead we got drunk"); and, eventually, we had been working on group projects, the effects of which could be seen during last day of School. One thing is certain – the creativity and ingenuity of the VSS participants knew no bounds!

The other workshop groups also wasted no time in becoming acquainted with their particular topics. After hearing the tips of the professional Nikko Biernacka, our brave photographers, equipped with a kind of a good artist's toolbox, went out and explored every nook and cranny of Nowa Huta and other districts which are not very popular among typical tourists within Krakow. Indefatigable, they always finished their work last, because as true artists, they perceived taking good shots as more important than hanging out in the hotel.

The "political identity" group had first focused on deliberating over the elements of identity together, and later, in the days that followed, spread out with enthusiasm to prepare films, interviews, surveys, and graphs – all in order to unravel whether the idea of a common European identity is in fact a realistic notion, or just a political slogan. Some chose the Erasmus scholarship as their subject of study, the principle of which is to help in the building of a "European identity," others were simply asking other participants about their own sense of belonging. There is no denying the fact that every group was enthusiastic and a pleasure to work with, the fact of which actually translated itself into the effectiveness and results of their activities.

A bit of controversy..

It is perfectly normal that when one makes a strong argument it often creates a clearly defined opposition, often enriching the discussion. Controversy was no doubt also present during the 11th Visegrad Summer School. The first heated debate of the event took place during Martin Ehl's lecture entitled "Gorilla at the Corrupt Tour." The lecturer first asked the students what they perceived as corruption and as it turned out, the views expressed on this issue were quite dissimilar and eye-opening. He quoted two cases from the Czech Republic and Slovakia, which clearly highlighted the use of corruption by people as a holding power. As you may guess, such a view provoked strong opposition among participants coming from these countries.

However, these debates were not only confined to political issues which tended to be problematic. The lecture: "No Limits? On Sexuality, Culture and Society" conducted by Magdalena Vášáryová, turned out to be both the most controversial and the longest cited one of the entire event! The former Ambassador argued that despite the passage of time, women in the V4 countries are still in a weaker social position and it is harder for them to succeed in professional and public life. This idea met with sharp protest from Alexandra of the Czech Republic, who made it clear that, to her, opportunities of both sexes are equal and it is only Mrs. Vášáryová's claim that causes cases of discrimination. There was also an outraged group of men, who argued that if they were women, they would feel offended at being presented as unable to succeed in society today.

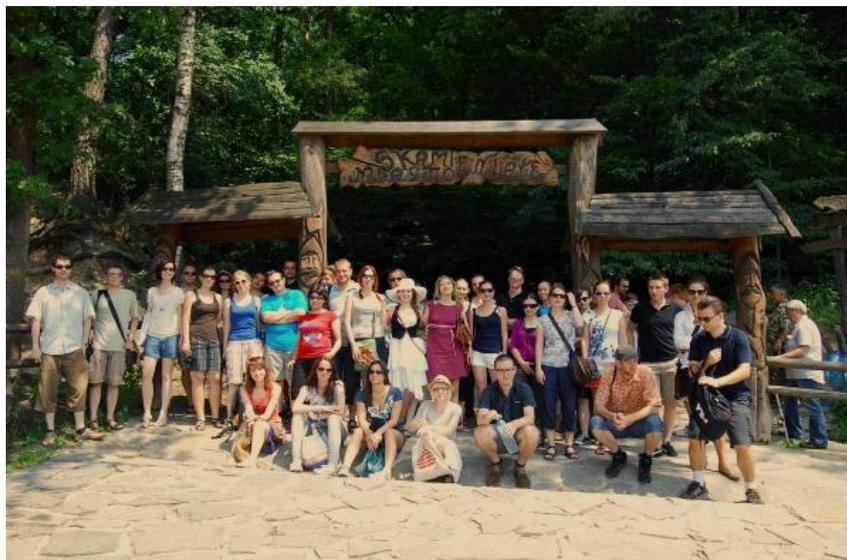
A topic that proved interesting was ecology; which also became a bone of contention. The lecture "Ecology and International Relations" by Marcin Gerwin, PhD, caused a visceral debate on the concept of global warming. Participants sought to challenge Mr. Gerwin's arguments and they argued passionately that climate change is not dependent on the actions of man. Many felt that ecology is a tool which is only used to achieve political goals.

Different face of Malopolska

Saturday came, the beginning of a long-awaited weekend, which in the dreams of the participants was supposed to be the opportunity to sleep off the week-long integration. Unfortunately, these idealistic plans had to be postponed for another week, as the meeting time had been mercilessly scheduled for 9 a.m. Sleepy, but enthusiastic, our participants took their seats on the bus, the driver turned on the engine and we headed towards the city of Gromnik. It did not come as a surprise, when we noticed that a strategic place in front, behind the driver and our tourist guide had been occupied by Ambrož. The long drive gave him yet ample opportunity to ask thousands of questions, starting with those on Polish breweries, up to the principles of promotion of teachers in our country.

When we had arrived, we headed straight towards the historic church in Gromnik, lying on the Małopolska Wooden Architecture Route. Father Andrew was waiting for us ready to support the guide in telling the long and unique history of the church. Unfortunately as always happens on the road, the time must come when everyone is eagerly looking for the relief of a toilet. This time, the moment came just after we arrived in Gromnik. In response to numerous requests, the priest invited us all to his presbytery; as a token of gratitude, everyone was required to write something in the commemorative book of the parish.

Despite the magnificent scenery, great weather and lively conversations between the priest and the participants, we could not stay any longer, because there was another place on our tight schedule – the Petrified City in Ciężkowice. There for a change, we admired the qualities of nature, and



the Ukrainian girls finally had the opportunity to take photos of the beautiful Polish natural scenery. We then enjoyed a traditional Polish dinner in Bobowa, which the weary travellers almost devoured. Using the opportunity to explore Bobowa which is a place famous for its tradition of lace making and interesting history, we set off to visit a historic synagogue. To our guide's delight, we found the monument's administrator in a very good mood. He eagerly told us about the history, owners and restoration process of the Jewish temple. The last point of our visit was the open-air ethnographic museum in Nowy Sącz, a nice and quiet place, which reflected the living condition of the former inhabitants of Małopolska in an accurate way.

It was a pure, but fortunate coincidence that back in Krakow, we found ourselves admiring "Shalom on Szeroka Street" concert of Jewish music. The participants could not miss such an event and despite the hardships of the journey and our late return, they went to the Kazimierz district, and together with a huge crowd of fans of klezmer music were celebrating the Jewish Culture Festival. Undoubtedly, they were enthralled by the magical atmosphere of the concert, as they were having fun until dawn and the next day passed on quickly through the exchange of their positive experiences.

"Fact or Fiction?" an alternative tour of Krakow



Sunday arrived and once again we could not sleep in until noon. We met at 10 a.m. at the Barbican, where we found our creative guides Ania Szwajgier and Alicja Natkaniec. Our alternative trip's plan was based on giving us false information about the city mixed with the actual historical facts. The participants' task was not to be fooled and find the traps set by guides. From the beginning, standing at

the Barbican we had the chance to hear a story that, initially, this place served as the Krakow's Colosseum, where knights fought fierce battles against wild beasts. Standing in front of Sukiennice, we learned that the inspiration for the gargoyles topping the attic came from remains of the skulls of late natives of the city excavated by archaeologists. What was most surprising, however, was that the manner of narration of these crazy stories was so convincing that most participants did not even attempt to undermine the credibility of the guides' words. Of course, during lunch, all the doubts and uncertainties had been dispelled, and students reacted to their own naivety with a smile. Nourished and satisfied, we strolled towards Kazimierz district, where we spent the rest of Sunday afternoon in a pleasant and relaxed atmosphere.

MultiCOOLtural Garden Party

I think that Thursday evening was what everybody was waiting for. At last, instead of lectures, the participants were to experience a form of pure entertainment at the Villa - MultiCOOLtural evening. Although the first ideas, discussions and brainstorming on the formula for the evening had began on Monday, the final result was rather spontaneous. The participants were polishing their presentations and games until the last minute, they

collected food and traditional drinks (most of them alcoholic) – an undeniable part of every participant’s culture, which they clearly wanted to highlight. Some teams tried to subtly sound out what others were preparing to present and be able to properly adjust and come off looking best. From the outset, Thursday was a day of full mobilisation. It was also the first day when national groups sat together at the table during lunch, and where they were conferring on balconies or in the garden. Still, there were unique individuals, like Petra Rakovská who wanted to speak Polish, sing Russian songs and help the Czechs, but not cooperate with the group to which she belonged – Slovak!



Everything began at 6 p.m. with a BBQ on the terrace, and later mixed group presentations began in the fireplace room. When Ambrož gleefully turned on the projector, it became clear that it would be an interesting evening. Our only Slovene grabbed everyone’s attention with his surreal version of the presentation of his country and completely won the hearts of the audience. The Hungarians prepared a lesson on their native language and a song, the words of which were haunting the participants for a long time. The real madness began, however, when the Polish group stepped in with their quiz that included high-proof alcohol and a game involving chairs characteristic for Polish wedding parties, all accompanied by truly authentic Polish music in the background. Presentations which were to last 20 minutes, were becoming longer and longer with time, but everyone was so busy having fun that there were no protests. The Czechs’ and Slovaks’



presentations followed, and then, at the very end, we had girls from Ukraine. The plans of making national "stands" on the terrace failed completely because of the weather, which treated us to rain and lightning. However, all had not yet been lost – the participants were tucking into Czech and Hungarian sweets and Slovak sheep cheese inside the Villa. Though our MultiCOOLtural evening ended much later than planned, we all went home in great form, singing "Kalinka" and Hungarian "Élvezd."

Time to say goodbye ..

Unfortunately all good things come to an end, even our 11th Visegrad Summer School. The Multicultural evening had inevitably heralded an imminent parting of the group, but to keep this unique, great atmosphere for as long as was humanly possible, we spent Friday night together enjoying dinner aboard a boat moored to the banks of the Vistula River. Unquestionably, we made for an enjoyable and unified group; the initial national divisions vanished into thin air and everyone felt terrific. The ubiquitous smiles, lively conversations and singing only confirmed these beliefs. We used our last hours together in the best manner we could and we tried not to contemplate our impending separation. Celebrations soon moved to the Kazimierz district, and the final parting reassured us that the friendships established at the Villa will certainly not end with our departures home.

One week passed, two weeks passed...

From the time perspective, I can say with full confidence that our assumptions about the group of this year's VSS were correct. Today the Visegrad Summer School moved to the virtual dimension. It only took a few days for a group VSS 2012 to be formed on Facebook, where participants exchange photos, memories, and have even started planning further meetings across the V4 Region. There is no doubt that the atmosphere in Krakow is contagious and some participants are even planning to return in the future to work, study or just holiday. Definitely, the time we spent together at the Visegrad Summer School was not wasted and will not be forgotten for many years to come. The biggest concern for many of the participants was that the VSS regulations do not permit the re-attendance to the event in the future, which only confirms that the two weeks spent at the Villa Decius marked a very positive experience in their lives.

Katarzyna Szymanowska
Kinga Środoń
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