
THE TRANSFORMATION OF EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS IN THE VISEGRÁD COUNTRIES: INTRODUCTION TO THE CONTEXT OF COMPARATIVE RESEARCH

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At the end of the 1980s, the geopolitical map of the world changed. Dramatic and revolutionary events ended the period of Cold War and the bipolar division of Europe which had lasted four decades. The countries of Eastern and Central Europe that formerly belonged to the socialist bloc set out on a journey towards pluralist democracy, a market economy and a legally consistent state. Eastern and Central European countries do not constitute and have never constituted a compact unit. They are marked by a considerable degree of cultural, historical, geopolitical and economic heterogeneity. Certain groups bearing similar features may yet be identified within them. These include Eastern and Central European countries, South-Eastern European countries, Baltic countries and Eastern European countries. The group of post-socialist countries from Eastern and Central Europe, the so-called Visegrád Four to which Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia belong, was marked out from as early as the beginning of the 1990s (at that time, there was still Czechoslovakia) as the “top-of-the-class club”, convinced, and convincing Europe and the world, about its greater stability and maturity than other post-socialist countries. The Visegrád alliance was an organisation with a purpose and has remained a free regional grouping to this day.

What do these countries have in common except for geographical location and the fact that they are neighbours? One thing they share is common cultural and historical roots derived from belonging to the Latin-Christian cultural circle. Their educational systems were formed in conditions of industrial revolution, under the influence of Austrian legislation on education. Their educational model of a Central European type was significantly influenced by the German model. National aspects presented a strong determining factor in the development of school systems. A school system organised at national level was one of their traditional values. They achieved significant levels of development, especially during the interwar period in the first half of the 20th century. After World War II, these countries became a part of the socialist bloc and they went through a period of totalitarian regime and a one-party government system. They bore the consequences of international isolation, limitations to their economic systems and subordination to one great power within the security structures of Warsaw Pact and the economic structures of The Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON).

From the 1950s till the 1980s, the educational systems of these countries developed according to a strongly unified model enforced by a power base. They

were based on similar economies and similar requirements upon the labour force. The approach to education was determined not only by social stratification but also by political affiliation and the degree of conformity with the governing regime.

The political, economic and social changes that the Visegrád countries underwent from the end of the 1980s were so fundamental and extensive, and so deeply affected every area of life, that we can hardly find any parallel in history. They were characterised by very rapid change over a relatively short time, especially in the first transition period.

The political changes involved a loosening of central state government and the removal of a unified monopoly ideology, democratization of institutions and pluralism in politics, providing space for the creation of structures and mechanisms of civil society with participation in political decision-making. The paternalistic role of the state was replaced by one providing opportunities for individuals; it was, however, accompanied by demanding requirements for orientation and individual responsibility in a social environment with threatened the secure environment to which citizens had previously been accustomed. There was extensive reconstruction and privatization in the parts of the economy which belonged to the state (in Czechoslovakia all of it and in Poland and Hungary most of it). These fundamental changes were not launched at the same time in all the Visegrád countries. In Poland and Hungary, they were in progress from the second half of the 1980s whereas in Czechoslovakia they started with the "Velvet" Revolution. The extent of their penetration, however, was more significant in Czechoslovakia.

The process of social transformation did not happen to the same extent or in the same way in every area of society. They were accompanied by turbulence and significant variations, increasing and changing social diversification and differentiation according to property ownership. The last mentioned feature was also related to citizens' level of satisfaction with the state of society. Although the beginning and development of social transformation in the Visegrád countries was neither chronologically identical nor uniform, they all had one political goal in common: to join Euro-Atlantic structures and an integrated Western Europe. Therefore, their effort was not primarily motivated by common interest. The satisfaction of individual national concerns and a certain degree of competition among those countries pre-dominated throughout almost the whole of the 1990s. The adoption of the social model was also connected with different perceptions of change and with finding suitable solutions in each country separately.

How and why was the Visegrád Group formed and how and why did it develop? What are its current goals, activities and problems?

The Visegrád Group was founded at Visegrád Castle in Hungary on February 15, 1991 as a free union of Central European post-communist countries. The presidents of Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland of that time signed the *Declaration on Cooperation in Striving for European Integration*. The main goal of this cooperation was to provide for the security of those countries because the Declaration was signed in the circumstances of an economic and security vacuum which arose in this region after the events of 1989 and their consequences connected with the

dissolution of the Soviet Union and unification of Germany. At the same time, the whole socialist bloc as well as its economic and security structures fell apart. The intention to coordinate activities in the processes of preparation for joining NATO and the European Communities presented another significant motive behind the alliance. The Visegrád Group specified its goals as follows:

- to restore state sovereignty, democracy and freedom;
- to eliminate all social, economic and ideological remnants of a totalitarian regime;
- to establish parliamentary democracy and a modern state bound by the rule of law;
- to create and establish a market economy.

Later this consultative and informal alliance became more focused. Chronologically, it is possible to distinguish several stages in its existence.

The *Initiation Period* (1991 - 1992) was characterised by international political instability. The common priority was to provide for the security and stability of the region. Within the context of beginning the transition from a centrally planned economy towards a market economy, the capital flow in the given region was liberalized on the basis of bilateral treaties. The countries consulted on issues connected with the disappearance of structures constituting the former socialist bloc as well as on their views of international political events and security issues, in particular the evacuation of Soviet troops. Their common viewpoints were, however, not defined. Each country acted as a sovereign country and the evacuation of Soviet troops proceeded separately in each country. With regard to starting the transition towards democracy and providing for stability in the region, the Visegrád Group received the support of the European Community. The countries signed Association Agreements with the EU but failed to submit an application to join the EU.

The Period of Enforcing Individual Strategies (1993 - 1998) was caused by the absence of cooperation as well as by changes in government. In the Czech Republic and Hungary, in particular, the political elite did not accept the idea of regional cooperation preferred enforcing the individual political interests of their countries in their external relationships as well as in the European integration process. Slovakia was mainly concerned with problems related to the strengthening of their newly established autonomy and preferred to cooperate with Eastern European countries. Poland alone tried to maintain the Visegrád project running; gradually, however, it directed its efforts to establishing bilateral relationships with Germany and France, both being influential EU members, and cooperation with Scandinavian countries. Regional cooperation in trade was being developed thanks to the Central European agreement on free trade (Central Europe Free Trade Area - CEFTA) which the Visegrád Four entered into in 1993. Later on, Slovenia, Romania and Bulgaria joined the agreement as well.

The effort to speed up the process of joining NATO intensified bilateral cooperation among the Visegrád countries in the field of military security. The positive outcome of this effort was the acceptance of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland into NATO in 1999 and intensified help to Slovakia in catching up with

the delay in the integration process.

The Revival Period (1998 - 2004) was characterised by the efforts of political representatives to support cooperation among Visegrád countries. This cooperation, however, followed particular motivations. Poland maintained a view of multilateral regional cooperation; Hungary strove for completion of the integration process in particular and for handling nationality issues; Czech representatives attempted to harmonize approaches and requirements within the integration process; Slovakia looked for support while overcoming the delay in its integration into NATO, in preparation for joining the EU and redirecting foreign policy towards the West. A new document called *The Content of Visegrád Cooperation*, passed in 1999, defined the framework of cooperation, its priorities and mechanisms. Furthermore, a system of presidency rotation was approved, and meetings of presidents and prime ministers were held annually. Cooperation at ministerial, parliamentary and expert level was more distinctly outlined, in issues concerning foreign affairs, defence, culture, environment, transportation and health care in particular. The civic dimension was more fully developed. This dimension was reflected in the organizing of significant cultural, social and sporting events. Education and research were the areas where cooperation was growing stronger, including exchange study programmes, scholarships and grants for projects of young researchers and Ph.D. students. The *International Visegrád Fund* established in 2000 significantly contributed to the blossoming of these activities.

When all the Visegrád countries joined the European Union in 2004, new problems common to the whole group arose, together with problems both between and within each of the countries involved.

The Visegrád Group did not become a regional international organization in the traditional sense with internationally acknowledged legal status. The cooperation between the countries of this Central European region did not have any precisely defined institutional structure, organizational background or scope of activity. The only permanent institution was the Visegrád Fund which supported cooperation between the four countries in the field of culture, science, sport and education, as well as cross-border cooperation and the development of civil society. The Visegrád Group maintained the status of a regional grouping with a purely consultative nature based on informal cooperation and regular meetings of the countries' top representatives and experts.

With regard to their dissimilarity and the pursuit of their own individual interests, the Visegrád countries were not able to create a "bridge" between Eastern and Western Europe without the cooperation of other countries to which they were bound to be linked given their geopolitical, historical and cultural situation. To a great extent, however, they may take credit for maintaining the security of Central Europe during the stirring "vacuum" at the beginning of the 1990s. No consensus has been achieved so far on its future existence, the form of the grouping or on cooperation with, and the prospective admission of, other Central and East European countries. The present development of the Visegrád Group indicates that even within the European Union, further cooperation between these countries will

not be based on a search for common standpoints even though their individual interests may reflect the common needs of the Central European region as the whole. Despite all their internal problems and partial disagreements (which exist in other countries and regions as well!), Visegrád is a significant Central European phenomenon and its role in strengthening cross-border cooperation and the civic dimension is not negligible.

There is no doubt that room for cooperation exists in the area of education and educational research. This fact is one of the main motives behind the project Research Centres on Schooling. Within this project, a comparative study called *The Development and State of Educational Systems in Visegrád Countries in the Context of Social Transformation Processes* is being prepared. The project's goal is to broaden the theoretical basis of educational reforms by providing knowledge from a group of countries which is rather marginal in international research. While identifying and analysing convergent and divergent tendencies, the study aims to contribute to the clarification of the countries' specific features and national educational systems, in the European context as well as in the process of defining the strategies and priorities of educational policy. The identification of common problems will undoubtedly contribute to more vigorous communication and cooperation among Visegrád Group educationalists as well as broader international cooperation with this group.

The project is connected to the comparisons included in a Council of Europe project called *The Main Tendencies and Agents of Educational Policy and Reforms in Central Europe* which was completed in 1997.

In December 2006, the Institute for Research and Development of Education from the Faculty of Education of Charles University initiated an international colloquium which was held in Prague. Important experts, including the well-known comparativist, Professor Wolfgang Mitter, participated in the colloquium. As the result of the discussion, a common theoretical framework for national studies encompassing the essential dimensions of transformation, was agreed upon. The outline plan of such studies forms the first stage of the project. They aim to follow the process of changing requirements of school education in societies undergoing transformation. Furthermore, they focus on how these requirements influenced the structure of educational system, emphasised the way schools operated, the nature of the curriculum and the professional activities of teachers. They also focus on how these requirements were reflected in legislation and educational policy. Emphasis is placed on school education (ISCED 1, 2 and 3) with several overlaps with other levels. National case studies that are now being published in their first version reflect the view from "within" the given countries. They describe the development and current state of school education and are the subject of vigorous theoretical and methodological discussions which will culminate in an international workshop in October 2007. *Interpretation* presents the next stage of the project. At this stage, the legislation and activities influencing the development of school systems in individual Visegrád countries will be explained. The thinking behind them and their consequences will also be examined. In the third stage,

a *comparative analysis* across the given countries will be carried out identifying common as well as specific features of the transformation process and convergent as well as divergent tendencies in the given region. On the basis of this analysis, some relevant theoretical conclusions will be drawn. An international comparative study published in English will be the outcome of this project. It is expected that cooperation between project teams will be an asset on the international as well as the personal level. Regarding the fact that the comparative analyses will be carried out on the macro-level of educational systems, it is presumed that the results of this project will constitute a relevant basis for educational policy and for analyses at lower levels of educational systems and that they may contribute to micro-analyses in the school environment as well as to the process of self-evaluation in schools.