

Event Report

“V4 Lessons Learnt: Sharing EU accession experience on anti-discrimination”

On November 18, 2013 CEU's Center for EU Enlargement Studies (CENS) hosted the concluding workshop of the one-year International Visegrad Fund project called "Online Platform on the EU Accession Experiences of the V4 Countries." The workshop brought together researchers evaluating the impact of EU accession mechanisms on the specific issue of anti-discrimination legislation and practices in Visegrad countries. Participants from the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (SFPA, Slovakia), Association for International Affairs (AMO, Czech Republic), Institute of Public Affairs (IPA, Poland) and the team at CENS shared their research output with representatives of similar NGOs and think tanks from Western Balkan countries (the Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence (Serbia), the Institute for Development and International Relations (Croatia), the Albanian Institute for International Studies (Albania), the Foreign Policy Initiative BH (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Civic Alliance (Montenegro), and the Kosovar Civil Society Foundation (Kosovo).

"Our main goal is to share our experiences, but not as ultimate truths," said Zsuzsanna Végh, one of the project coordinators and a researcher at CENS. "We want to facilitate a conversation between Visegrad and Balkan countries and learn from each other."



Panel I: Anti-discrimination Legislation in the Visegrad Countries

In the first panel, Véghe and Vladimír Bilčík from the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (SFPA) discussed how their respective countries (Hungary for Véghe and Slovakia for Bilčík) adopted anti-discrimination strategies and laws as a condition for EU membership. In both cases, the procedures were complex and met with resistance. In fact, Véghe noted that the majority of experts and practitioners active in the field of human rights and anti-discrimination whom she interviewed during her research said that if there was no EU obligation, Hungary would not have any anti-discrimination legislation. “The EU is making potential member states adopt these measures but it’s more of a formal conditionality – like ticking a box,” Véghe noted. Implementation, on the other hand, has proved difficult. Bilčík pointed out that norms that are well-established in Western European countries aren’t always easily applied to Central and Eastern European countries that have their own cultures and, for many of them, a Soviet legacy. The panel ended with brief presentations of anti-discrimination legislation in Western Balkan countries and a discussion on the hardships of its implementation.



Péter Balázs on Post-Accession Conditionality

Péter Balázs, CEU professor and CENS director echoed these sentiments. “Is the Western European model the best solution for Eastern Europe?” he asked. “On the Eastern side, there was an illusion of welfare – believing that EU membership would bring a good, stable life. It hasn’t come to fruition yet. We are quite a distance from Austria and Germany, for example. There was a belief on the Western side that adaptation and obeying would result rather soon in a homogenous integration. That’s not the case. We have much stronger traditions from the past, including Communist times that don’t change easily and are creating a mixture that is resisting the Western European model.”

The second panel dealt with the rights of women and people with disabilities in Visegrad countries. Vít Dostál from the Association for International Affairs (AMO) in the Czech Republic and Marta Gałązka from the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) in Poland were featured speakers.



Panel II: Rights of women and people with disabilities in the Visegrad countries

Dostál began his presentation by introducing the political and societal climate of the Czech Republic, touching upon the anti-discriminatory law and the judicial system in general. He continued by explaining what kind of financial influence the EU had on the Czech Republic and how the money redistribution took place. The biggest part of Dostál's presentation was centered around sharing seven most important lessons learned with the partners from Western Balkans: decision makers are not under enough pressure; the influence of the EU is important; the judicial system is slowly transforming thanks to the EU; the communication with the society is not done properly; the influx of attainable money transforms the non-governmental sector; the bureaucratization and inability of the Czech decision makers; the need for a nationwide debate about the importance of gender equality.

During the workshop, members of Western Balkan NGOs and civil organizations were able to discuss their experiences as their respective countries strive for EU membership. The workshop also served as an official launch for the project's website www.visegradplatform.ceu.hu, a tool aimed at sharing Europeanization experiences on anti-discrimination issues in new and potential future EU member states. The research papers prepared in the course of the project will be available on the project website, as well.



The Project Team

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