

## **Visegrad Summer School 2008: Connecting for the future**

By Michaela Stanková

As any other summer Sunday, Krakow is overwhelmed by tourists strolling around the Main Square, climbing up the Wawel hill and wishing that the water in Vistula would be cleaner so that they could jump in and have a swim. It's high-season Sunday afternoon, the 6 July, and Krakow lives its usual rhythm, being completely unaware that today is the day when the summer school gathering clever young people from all over Europe starts in the quiet part of the city, in Villa Decius.

The Visegrad Summer School has been organized in Villa Decius in Krakow since 2002. The main purpose of the school is to bring together young people who have the potential to be the future leaders in their respective countries and regions and expose them to an alternative learning environment which would allow them to discuss European and Visegrad topics from new perspectives.



**They are young and demanding. Nadia from Ukraine asking another tough question.**

The participants come from the countries of the Visegrad Group, namely Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, but also from neighbouring countries. This year the list of participants includes names from Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, Moldova, Romania, Serbia and Bosnia, but also countries of Western Europe, such as France and Malta. The Visegrad Summer School is mainly attracting students, young

researchers, journalists and professionals – people who care about their future and the future of their countries. According to one of them, Mateusz Białas from Poland, the Visegrad Summer School is a well-known and prestigious event, always organized on a high educational level.

“Taking part in such seminars and summer schools is a great opportunity to meet wonderful people, to talk with them and get to know their, often different, point of view,” he said. Indeed, reading through the short biographies of the participants, one gets the feeling that this truly is the future elite of Europe – their studies, their interests, their experience and their future plans are in many ways different, but they have something in common – being ambitious. They want to get the best out of lectures, seminars and everything they are offered. They went through a selection process with demanding criteria, and so no wonder that they are demanding too.

Villa Decius is not a random location for the Visegrad Summer School. It’s been a place for encounters, talks and arts for people from all over Europe ever since it’s been built. Therefore the decision to organize a summer school here for clever young Europeans seemed like a natural decision.



**The discussion with Michal Vašečka continued even outside the lecture room.**

The Visegrad Summer School is one of the major projects of the Villa Decius Association. As Danuta Glondys, the director of the Association, told the participants,

there are many events organized in the Villa every year, but the place has its special atmosphere which simply doesn't accept some of the events. The fact that this year it's already the 7<sup>th</sup> edition of the Visegrad Summer School shows that the school and the Villa really belong together. And the Villa itself is an attraction and reason for the students to take part in the summer school. Nadia Parfan, a participant from Ukraine, said she chose the Visegrad Summer School because of the good image of the Villa Decius.

"Some Ukrainian writers and other open-minded people whom I really like have already been to the Villa," said Nadia. "Their impression was totally positive, so I knew it was worth coming."

The inter-cultural dialogue is the leading feature of the gathering, but some lecturers and experts claim the importance of the inter-generational dialogue. András Láncki, a Hungarian political scientist who was ranked among the best lecturers of the 7<sup>th</sup> edition of the Visegrad Summer School in the participants' evaluation, said he comes here regularly to give lectures, but mainly he comes because he wants to listen to the young generation and everything they have to say.



**Panel debate on 1968 belonged to the favourite points in the programme of VSS.**

The programme of the 7<sup>th</sup> edition of VSS included lectures, panel debates and discussion about a big variety of topics, every day being focused on a different issue.

The leading themes of VSS 2008 were the accession of V4 countries into the Schengen area, relations between Central and Eastern Europe, the role of the V4 countries and their neighbours today and the current issues Europe is dealing with.

However, VSS is not only academic work and serious discussions. Cultural programme and extracurricular activities help to create the atmosphere and form an important part of the whole programme. Apart from the Visegrad Film Festival that featured three movies from Visegrad countries and enjoyed the reputation of being one of the best points in the programme, there were several other events where participants could get to know each other on an informal level. Among them, the weekend trips to Zawoja and Nowa Huta, during which students of VSS could get familiar with the traditional culture of people living in Polish mountains or the specifics of Nowa Huta, a controversial neighbourhood of Krakow which was built during the communist era to be the ideal of a communist city.

In Zawoja, entertainment and fun meets the attempts to teach the participants something about the environment. After all, the summer school proudly claims to be emission-free – and so the first point in Saturday's programme in Zawoja is a walk to the forest, where the students plant 210 trees to make up for all the emissions created by the VSS.



**Elena from Moldova and her contribution to make the VSS emission-free.**

By the time the weekend was over, friendships had already become strong and people felt like they had known each other for ages. The positive mood of the group fully showed at the big party in the Villa, the multiCOOLtural evening, where everybody got a chance to present either their country's culture and products or their understanding of multi-cultural communication. And thus the participants of VSS got a chance to dance the traditional Polish polonez, sing a traditional Slovak song or taste the wines from Hungary. And despite the concerns of those who didn't like the idea of dividing the international group back to national groups that should present their own culture, it proved to be a way how to overcome stereotypes and get closer to each other.



**Katarzyna from Poland and Péter from Hungary dancing *polonez*.**

“People were great, I discovered that there is more than just cultural and linguistic connection between Poles, Czechs, Slovaks and Ukrainians – not to forget about the great spiritual Polish-Hungarian one,” said Katarzyna Linda from Poland, who thanks to her VSS experience started thinking that the famous proverb about the brotherhood of the Polish and the Hungarian nation might be true.

Breaking stereotypes. And above all, socializing and networking. Two words gaining more and more importance in the contemporary world ruled by communication in any form. Socializing and networking were among the main motives for the students to

take part in the Visegrad Summer School, as most of them claimed during the final evaluation. For this part, their expectations were more than fulfilled.

Andras Horvath from Hungary said he appreciated the people and the atmosphere in the group rather than the academic output. “It was more about making friends, but whether these connections are strong enough is a matter of time,” he said. “Nonetheless, for two weeks we were friends, who also tried to act professionally and show some interest in the important things in the world.”

For Libor Fus from the Czech Republic, the participation in the summer school was supposedly one of the best decisions in his life, as he said, also stressing the importance of the new connections in combination with the knowledge acquired during the 13 days in Villa Decius. “After a few months I have to take a look into my papers to remember some of the lectures, but I will never forget the people I’ve met,” he said, expressing in simple words the common feeling among the participants of the 7<sup>th</sup> edition of the Visegrad Summer School.