

The Visegrád Group and Thailand: Transcending the “Freezer-Purgatory” Dilemma

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As Jacque Rupnik points out in his 1990 article entitled “Out of the Ice and into the Fire”, the Polish journalist David Warszawski has controversially likened Communism to a freezer “in which, half a century ago, living people were stored. Normally one would not survive such treatment, but in addition, the freezer broke down! So everything that was put into it fifty years ago comes out in very poor condition” (Rupnik 59). Referring to Warszawski as his departure point, Rupnik suggests that, after the thaw of the long deep authoritarian freeze, ideologies such as xenophobia, ultra-nationalism, religious extremism and right-wing fundamentalism began to melt and the traces of their (decaying) lives returned to the stage in an uncanny and anachronistic fashion. However, Rupnik does not stop here. He goes on to make an even more controversial claim that Communism can also be seen as a form of purgatory, a condition where Central and Eastern Europe has come to learn the art of democracy (60). In this case, if the past was indeed a form of purgatory, the modern-day forms of alliance and cooperation among post-Communist countries could then be likened to a new kind of freezer, the true challenge which awaits Central and Eastern Europe.

The Visegrád Group, which is an alliance of four Central European states of the Czech Republic, Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic, is one of the modern-day forms of alliance and cooperation in Europe facing such a challenge. The member countries, in their own ways and as a unified group, are conscious of their newly gained agency to dictate their own future and destiny. Perhaps, in a region called “Central Europe”, a label which—often used in the past as a concept in service of foreign interests as reflected in the term and history of “Mitteleuropa”—has escaped definitions throughout history, the freezer and the purgatory can be avoided if regional cooperation is treated not as a fixed destination. Regional cooperation can be likened to a tool

adapted and utilised to defrost the ice age of authoritarianism and also to quell the region's necessary "Baptism by Fire" with the kind of endurance which had in the past manifested in the region's struggle for freedom and democracy. Though the post-modernist Slovak writer Pavel Vilikovský scathingly wrote in one of his short stories: "What do they mean by Central Europe, when with all the curtains around it, you can't see past your own barn!" (Vilikovský 8), the Visegrád member countries have undoubtedly torn down the Iron Curtain and stepped forward as important players on the EU economic and political stage. The Visegrád Group has undoubtedly been an exemplar of the kind of alliance based on the members' shared geo-cultural heritage which no "curtain" politics could destroy. The fact that the V4 integration has not been institutionalised has generated controversies. On one hand, because cultures, religious traditions, national histories and government policies of the V4 members are dramatically different and diverse, critics and thinkers predicted the end of the Visegrád Group unless it opts for institutionalisation. On the other hand, critics and thinkers saw the strength in the kind of alliance which confirms its historical ties but, at the same time, similar to the label of "Central Europe", escapes the legal and physical boundaries which can sometimes be a hindrance to other regional groups. It is the latter argument that Thailand, in particular, might be able to learn from the Visegrád Group.

Incidentally, the "deep freeze" metaphor, as well as the aforementioned "freezer-purgatory" dilemma, is neither new nor alien to the people of Thailand. Since the year 2012, on one hand, there have been civilians and politicians who voluntarily wish for the deep freeze, campaigning to bring Thailand to its own "freezing point" of political stagnation and ultra-nationalism allegedly to avoid the "hell" of corruption. On the other hand, there have been civilians and politicians who regard the trials and tribulations in Thai society, a society which has been struggling with deep-rooted class and social conflict, as a necessary purgatorial step towards freedom and democracy. To conveniently contain the problem in a freezer of a unifying yet totalitarian regime is worse than to confront the problem and resolve the conflict itself. Thus Thailand is a living exemplar of such "freezer-purgatory" dilemma and should also be made conscious of its agency to dictate its future and destiny, one of which is its integration with the ASEAN economic community.

Similar to the case of the Visegrád Group, the diversity of cultures, languages, religious traditions, government policies and national histories—particularly colonial and anti-colonial legacies—in Southeast Asia can be a

challenge to the regional integration project when such integration is treated as an end in itself, not as a means to an end. As in the case of both ASEAN and the Visegrád Group, one of the foremost objectives here is not to unite by homogenising and, by so doing, obliterating diversity and fostering indifference. To offer an example in Thailand, the anachronistic and ultra-nationalist drama series adaptation of the legend of Bang Rajan, an alleged patriotic resistance against the Burmese invaders in Burmese–Siamese War (1765–1767) which led to the demise of the Ayutthaya Kingdom, recently made Thais feel united as a nation but shamelessly fuelled their hatred and prejudice towards an important neighbour country. In the words of Associate Professor Dr. Sunait Chutintaranond, former Director of Chulalongkorn University’s Asian Studies Programme, “We are in a dilemma now and this needs to be fixed. On the one hand, we want nationalism in the country. On the other, we want regional unity as we are entering the ASEAN Economic Community. The problem is we don’t know which way we are going” (Pongpipat). The freezer of ultra-nationalist unity and the purgatorial trials and tribulations of ultra-regionalist unity can and should be transcended. **Diversity should be seen as an asset, not a liability.** Regional integration among member countries can itself be a legacy and, at the same time, a tribute to its citizens who have propelled and made possible the democratic changes and reforms in the region. Thailand, ASEAN and the Visegrád Group can therefore learn from one another.

Taking Warszawski’s freezer metaphor, Rupnik’s purgatory metaphor and Thailand’s recent reaction to the dramatisation of Bang Rajan legend into consideration, one might be able to find ways to rise above the “freezer-purgatory” dilemma through a cross-temporal as well as cross-cultural comparative analysis of the Visegrád Group and Thailand. It is here that the field of Humanities and educational projects such as the Chulalongkorn University- Visegrád 4 Collaboration Project come to the fore and play significant roles in forging a better understanding of where one stands in the world of complex geo-politics. History, sociology and literary studies, in particular, are fundamental critical thinking tools with which young people—our future—should be equipped. Here is an example.

In his article, the Hungarian academic Csaba G. Kiss reminds readers of an important metaphor which was first used by the twentieth-century Hungarian writer László Németh. The metaphor is that of Hungary as one of Europe’s “foster brothers” (Kiss 17), brothers who do not share the same blood but are nevertheless suckled at the breast of the same mother—the same culture of liberalism. Németh, having witnessed the tragedy of

the Treaty of Trianon which stripped Hungary of the territorial power and imperial legacy enjoyed by Stephen I's medieval kingdom, called for the Hungarian citizens of his time to think of their home country as one of the many nations living together, like foster brothers, in a community of Central European nations. Németh's metaphor brings on centre stage the urgency and necessity of respect and a profound understanding of the histories of one's neighbour countries. This can be done by relinquishing the ultra-nationalist attitude that one's nation is superior to the other.

As fellow denizens, as "foster brothers and sisters" of the same world, one can easily imagine László Németh in dialogue with Associate Professor Dr. Sunait Chutintaranond. Thus, one of the CU-V4 collaboration project's main objectives is to encourage citizens of Thailand and the V4 countries to learn from one another and be in dialogue with one another in order to find ways to transcend the "freezer-purgatory" dilemma.

Perhaps the ultimate goal of regional integration is not financial gain or political power, but an understanding of an individual, culture and region built upon mutual respect and appreciation of cultural, national and regional diversity—which should be fostered to bloom in unity.

Works Cited

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