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Visegrádi Kézikönyv [The Visegrad Manual]

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This work was created in order to learn more about the history of the Hungarians and also about the nations that live in Central and Eastern Europe and to discover their shared past by excellent writers who are the No. 1 specialists of this subject-matter as university professors and researchers. The "Szent Adalbert Közép- és Kelet-Európa Kutatásokért Alapítvány" (St. Adalbert Foundation for Research in Central and Eastern Europe) has a key role to play in the publication of this book; the bishop who lent his name to the Foundation was making efforts as a humble servant of the Church in this region in the 1990s to bring together the nations of Central and Eastern Europe. But, both the objective and the message of this book is to examine events that took place a lot closer in time, specifically the highlights of the development in the social, economic, political as well as the public sphere in the Visegrad region after 1989. Fundamentally, it gives an insight into the historical traditions and the common destiny of four countries, including the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia. As regards the review of this book, one of the most important years is 1991 when three Central-European countries founded the Visegrad Group (with Czechoslovakia in existence before 1992). The primary goal of their jointly pursued course was, on the one hand, to break free from the pressure put on them by the Soviet Union and to implement the Euro-Atlantic security policy and, on the other hand, to promote European integration via starting a dialogue and readiness for co-operation among the countries which became such a success that despite temporary difficulties the V4 became one of the most important and fastest growing communities in international politics. Providing a summary picture of the Visegrad Group, presenting their common past and their economic, social and political systems is no easy task, all the more so for reasons of clarity and interpretation. The strength of the book lies in its organisation and excellent structure. In addition, it is important to note that it is pleasant to read and easy to understand thanks to its language, its terminology and choice of words. Contrary to traditional volumes, the reader will have not only country studies in his hand, but thoroughly considered chapters that follow a well-designed scheme. First, a short historic introduction across a few pages helps the reader to tune in on the subject and become familiar with the ideas and assumptions that are the most important in this book. Then, the reader is presented with approximately 70 pages on the change of regimes in Central-Europe, its most important events and inter-relationships in a thoroughly built and well-structured, parallel layout. This historical overview begins with a regional entry that applies to all four countries which incorporates the year 1989 and its events that have triggered so many problems by now, also offering a short glimpse into

the closing of the 20th century. However, the book does not forget about the position, the entities or the time limits of the individual countries. It shows the flow of events, starting with the facts and inter-relationships of the change in regimes concerning the Czechs and Czechoslovakia, continuing with relevant information on the Poles and finally adding details about Hungary. Providing a backdrop about the individual regions is taken so seriously that it reaches back to the Middle Ages, for example in the case of the Czech Republic, to analyse the development of its sovereign territory, not forgetting the “Velvet Revolution” or the key sentence of “Habemus papam” uttered by Cardinal Protodeacon Pericle Felici. The author provides his readers with a wealth of important information well-matched both in time and space (concerning persons, events and venues) in this chapter.

After the historical introduction, the Manual chose a rather peculiar, but even more deliberate form for comparing the countries of the Visegrad Region and analysing and presenting their certain common features of key importance. The volume provides an excellent example that the period after 1989 which is often referred to as the year of the great turnaround also raises similar problems for the four nations that need to be resolved, particularly with regard to the transformation of their political systems and the development of democratic parliamentarianism. Exactly because of this, it addresses the most important issues and attitudes affecting the region, from seven key aspects, laid out in seven main chapters. These seven main chapters include constitutional development, parties and party systems, regions and public administration, churches and denominations, national minorities, foreign politics, national and cultural symbols which are broken down into further sub-chapters for easier overview and greater transparency. Apart from the easier overview, the individual sub-chapters give excellent examples of identical tendencies and problems that affect all four countries, while they highlight certain national characteristics, i.e. certain national specificities. The specific position of the four countries are used to describe the new territorial division of public administration and the system of local government and public administration based on it which became decisive from the second half of the 1990s. The reader gets an interesting but all the more comprehensive picture about how the societies and the churches of the region related to and survived 40 years of communist oppression. It also shows how difficult it was for the religious denominations to decide whether their primary task should be the recovery of the economic background and the confiscated assets and the rebuilding of the institutional structure or the encouragement of spiritual revival after communism. Of course, the four countries related to these issues differently, let alone the neuralgic points caused by the national minorities. That chapter of the volume illustrates remarkably that ethnic tensions have left their mark on the whole of the 19th and 20th centuries, due to several parallel nation-building campaigns. The book also puts great emphasis on economic questions within modernisation processes since the development of market economy played a major role in both the political and social transformation. This may include the burden of foreign debt covered in the book which weighed heavily not only on the Hungarians but also on the Poles. It is a prominent point that the memories of certain political trends and ideologies live on differently and they all influenced the development and arrangements in the individual countries after 1989. All in all, the Visegrad Manual provides useful guidance to everyone who wants to learn more

about the processes in the change of political regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. It helps people to navigate through specific processes and offers a comprehensive overview in the light of the historical, political and economic events. The tables and other annexes of the book, compiled with utmost care, boost its transparency and help the reader to come to grips with the changes affecting the Visegrad region in the past 25 years.

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