

Ostrava, 5 November 2014

Visegrad Group clusters set their sights on Southeast Asia

On 4 and 5 November 2014 Ostrava hosted the final conference held as part of the V4Clusters project. The aim of this project is to strengthen cluster-based cooperation within the Visegrad Group of Central European countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia – also known as the V4) and to create sector-specific groups of clusters operating in four key industries which rank among the V4's key strengths: mechanical engineering, the automotive sector, furniture manufacturing, and telecommunications. Two thirds of the project's total budget of 61,000 EUR has been financed by the International Visegrad Fund. Delegates at the Ostrava conference addressed a range of issues – how to maximize cooperation among clusters based in the V4 countries, possibilities for expanding cooperation with member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and specific examples of collaborative projects involving companies and universities from the Czech Republic and the Philippines.

The V4Clusters project was launched in October 2013. It is coordinated by the Czech Republic's National Cluster Association (NCA), which initiated the project; the other key partners are the Union of Slovak Clusters, the Upper Silesian Agency for Entrepreneurship and Development (Poland), and the Pannon Business Network Association (Hungary). The November 2014 conference was the final event of the project, providing a forum for delegates from the partner organizations to meet with the leading clusters' managers and foreign ministry representatives from all V4 countries.

Pavla Břusková, President of the NCA, gives more details: "Cluster organizations from the V4 countries are seeking to boost their members' competitiveness by supporting international cooperation both within and among sectors – whether in established industries or emerging areas. We also work together to seek out opportunities in new territories – currently focusing particularly on the countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)." Břusková adds that the project has helped to map the presence of cluster organizations within the V4 countries, creating an extensive and detailed database: "In order to promote the V4 countries on the global market, we first identified our strongest cluster sectors. Each of the four sectors is coordinated by a leading cluster from a different country: mechanical engineering is the responsibility of the Czech Machinery Cluster (headed by Ladislav Mravec); furniture is coordinated by a leading Hungarian cluster; Poland is responsible for telecommunications (ICT); while Slovakia coordinates the automotive clusters. Each of the four coordinators has drawn up action plans based on what the cluster networks can offer, what support they need, and what measures they want to promote within the policy frameworks of the V4 governments."

The V4 clusters are taking a closely coordinated approach to the ASEAN markets, guided by the Memorandum on international cooperation signed in May of this year. Pavla Břusková sums up the purpose of cluster-based cooperation: "European policymakers see clusters as a key tool for the development of SMEs, helping them to boost their competitiveness." A major advantage of the V4 clusters' approach is the fact that the ASEAN countries prefer to work with entire regions (such as the Visegrad Group) rather than with individual countries.

The ASEAN region has recently come to the fore as a potential market due to the current restrictions on trade with Russia.

One of the speakers at the conference was Břetislav Skácel, Honorary Consul-General of the Philippine Republic and the manager of the CREA Hydro & Energy Cluster. Skácel sees the ASEAN markets as a huge source of potential: "It's particularly important to coordinate our approach in this region because not all of the V4 countries have diplomatic representation in the ASEAN member states. The Czech Embassy in the Philippines often helps to represent the interests of Slovakia, Poland and Hungary in addition to those of the Czech Republic." Skácel is convinced that the ASEAN countries represent a major potential market for the V4 clusters. A consortium of Czech companies (members of the CREA Hydro & Energy Cluster) has recently achieved success in the Philippines with a hydroelectric power plant project. Cooperation among universities is also developing rapidly; Brno's Mendel University is co-organizing the ICABR international conference with Kasetsart University from Thailand, and this year it has launched a programme of cooperation with Visayas State University in the Philippines.

The V4Clusters project consists of three phases: i) identification, ii) networking, iii) informatisation of cluster organizations existing in Visegrad Group countries.

Clusters are powerful engines of economic development and drivers of innovation in the EU. It is a challenge for the V4 to address the cluster issue by this pilot project enabling its integration in a broader V4 agenda. The aim of the project is to open the potential hidden in clusters and their cooperation across strong and emerging sectors of the V4 by their identification and informatisation in the digital depository. One of the main goals of the networking phase is to establish collaborative cluster networks represented by the V4 Leading clusters prepared for the V4 globalisation.

The project is co-financed by the International Visegrad Fund and implemented in the period of October 2013 to December 2014. More information it is possible to find here: www.v4clusters.eu.