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Foreword

Main idea of the conference that was realized in 2012 was relatively simple: to compare various positions towards historical personalities and events in Central European countries. Rather provocative title of the conference *My hero, your enemy* was based on the fact that a successful politician in one country or an important and celebrated event in its history can often provoke an ambiguous reaction in neighboring country or countries. Particularly, inside of such close space as the Central Europe is.

The realization of the project was considered for a relatively long time. There were concerns that the topic was rather dangerous and conference may end up with a sharp clash of Visegrad historians. There was also a problem with title which was taken as too irritant. During one discussion on other variants of the title, original compromise proposal emerged – to put at the end of the title a question mark as a sign of historical optimism... Particularly this sophisticated joke set the wheels in motion.

We can meet controversy embodied in the title *My hero – your enemy* in any historical period but approaching our times the topic is becoming more and more sensitive. Neighbouring countries are able to *forgive* Czechs for their Hussites, however, personality of former Czechoslovak president Edvard Beneš has been able to provoke controversies till today. Discussion on role of such *complicated* persons has sometimes even explosive political potential.

The second conference *National Identities in Central Europe in the Light of Changing European Geopolitics 1918–1948*, organized in 2015, develops the idea of the first discussion on the mentioned topic. As its organizers announced: *In a similar way to its predecessor the conference will focus on national histories. Moreover, it will also try to build a bridge and to identify links between historical events and the contemporary identity politics in the Visegrád countries.*

Both conferences, supported by the International Visegrad Fund, were based on *modest* wish expressed by organizers in subtitle of the

first conference: *Listening to Understand*. Vivid but very correct exchange of opinion led during these conferences demonstrated that it is possible to discuss very delicate topics, if people are prepared not only to speak and promote their opinion as the only right but also to listen. Particularly this moment has been one of the most important results of these two meetings of experts who managed to leave various historical animosities, sometimes accompanied with political ambitions, at the door.

Another important contribution of both conferences, let's hope that they will have continuation, lies not only in cultivated and meaningful *multilog* of experts from various branches; it also lies in dialogue with our common history, with our traditions. Whether we like it or not, history has had its impact on our present and such dialogue can help us to understand this influence better. At the same time, we should understand that such dialogue will not often lead to mutually acceptable results because in various society it has various grounds.

The question what historical truth is, if it exists, would be an issue for very serious methodological discussion, but let it be only said here that history can be *a good servant but a bad master*. Relativity of historical explanations, falsification of history or its misuse can have a very negative impact on the relations between nations as we can, unfortunately, see in contemporary world as well. Evenhanded and factual character of most of contributions presented in this book shows the way how to deal with history, no matter how complicated. And it should be not only another result of both conferences but also an example worth emulating.

No doubts that readers will make their own conclusions but it is not enough because it is necessary to disseminate them if we want to have our world more secure and friendly.

Petr Vágner, former director of International Visegrad Fund