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# **The role of Visegrád 4 and CEFTA in the Euro-Atlantic Integration of the East-Central European Region<sup>1</sup>**

## **FACTORS OF COHESION**

Almost ten years have passed since fundamental political and socio-economic changes started in East-Central Europe (ECE). This round-figure anniversary gives an occasion to look back to 1989-1990 when the basic directions of the transition to market economy and democracy were formed in very difficult, sometimes turbulent debates between political forces.

Looking back from a ten-year distance it is now clear that the adopted by the first freely elected governments in ECE were more or less identical. They included:

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- in the internal policy: to create a multi-party, parliamentary democracy with the rule of law and an active civil society,
- in economy: re-structuring of ownership-relations and business conditions via privatisation and marketisation; stabilising the crisis-affected economies,
- in foreign relations: an overall re-orientation including the withdrawal of Soviet troops (wherever they stationed), re-structuring of external political and trade relations and integration to the euro-atlantic structures i.e. the NATO and the European Communities.

However, as it is often emphasised by prominent transition researchers from BEREND to KORNAI and MARER<sup>2</sup>, common priority aims and tasks have been implemented with different speed, efficiency and methods depending generally on a set of historical, economic, political, cultural and other factors providing initial conditions for the transition process. Such initial conditions were to a considerable extent favourable and similar in three relatively developed member-countries of the late Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA): Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary. During the post-1989 period, these three (after the separation of the Czech Republic and Slovakia: four) countries have formed a particular sub-region with similar objectives and interstate agreements.

The question may arise, what are the basic factors motivating regional and sub-regional cohesion. In theoretical terms, motivation should be rooted in similarities and convergences of endowments and development choices. Drawing conclusions from the regionalist experiences in the last decades, British researcher A. HURRELL identified five such components: geographical proximity, social (historical, ethnic, cultural), economic, political and organisational cohesiveness.<sup>3</sup> Examining the mentioned sub-region, elements of cohesion can easily be observed.

*First:* geographic closeness and contiguity are given. All the three countries belong to what geographers and economists usually call 'the Northern tier of ECE' when they want to distinguish it from the Balkans and the Western ex-republics of the former Soviet Union.

*Second:* the countries have common history in many aspects. All of them had been victims of various kinds of foreign occupations, were parts of great empires, lacked national independence for long centuries. All belong to the sphere of Western Christian civilisation, three of them are parts of Slavic culture as well. Due to historic factors, populous national minority groups of each other live within the state borders. There are long traditions of close co-existence between Czechs and Slovaks, Slovaks and

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<sup>2</sup> Ivan T. Berend (ed.): Transition to a Market Economy at the End of the 20th Century, Südosteuropa Gesellschaft, München, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Hurrell: Explaining the resurgence of regionalism in world politics, Review of International Studies, Vol. 21. Nr.4. October 1995, pp. 331-358.

Hungarians, feelings of Hungaro-Polish friendship are also deeply rooted in history. Beside their national identity, peoples of the region also feel to be part of Central Europe with all its cultural and socio-psychological implications. In sum: the countries in question are connected to each other by strong and traditional bonds of social cohesiveness. At the same time, there were also serious factors and memories of desintegration in the historic past (e.g. national minority conflicts within the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, failure of federalist ideas in the past 100 years, collapse of the artificially created multilateral structures such as CMEA, WP in the socialist period) which had to be overcome in theory and practice after 1990.

*Third:* the level of economic development of the four states and their trade relations are determined by their geopolitical location and historic factors. All countries belonged to the European semi-periphery and could join the mainstream of European industrial development only loosely and with a substantial delay (excepting the Czech Republic). Centrally planned, state-socialist economy, that they equally followed for more than forty years, in final analysis, failed to bring about socio-economic modernisation and catching up with the developed part of Europe and national economies faced a heavy crisis by the end of the 1980s. All of them belong to the category of small-size and open economies very much reliant on foreign resources and markets. However, autarchy imposed by CMEA led to relative isolation from the main currents of world economy distorting national economies. By 1990, share of all the countries in world trade decreased including fallback of exports and competitiveness. Intra CMEA-trade started to drop in the second half of the eighties. After the political changes, trade between the four countries decreased by its half and reached its historic nadir in 1991-92.<sup>4</sup>

*Fourth:* politically, all the countries became Stalinised in the late 1940s and followed the Soviet model of one-party dictatorship based on Marxist-Leninist ideology. However, in each country there were significant revolutionary upheavals against the system and Soviet dominance during the fifties, sixties and seventies and alternative political forces in more or less organised shape emerged in the eighties to form an opposition against the Communist establishment. A further similarity is that Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary were the model countries of 'negotiated revolution' ('velvet revolution', or in the words of T.G. ASH, 'refolution') i.e. peaceful transition to market economy and democracy with centre-rightist parties coming to power after the first free parliamentary elections.

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<sup>4</sup> In 1991, the share of the two other countries in Hungary's foreign trade came down below 5% contrasted to over 7% in 1989. Pál Majoros: Foreign Trade Relations of Hungary, BBS, 1999, p. 109.

As regards international political and regional security environment, during and after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, the former member-states of CMEA and Warsaw Pact found themselves in security vacuum between two powers, the newly re-united, emerging Germany and the unstable, decaying Soviet Union. In this situation, the only way to satisfy security needs of new democracies proved to be the integration into NATO and the European Communities.

*And fifth:* organisational cohesiveness has also a long historic past in the region. The idea of 'subregionalism' found its precedents in such unrealised projects of the last and current centuries as e.g. the 'Federation of Danube Valley States' suggested by KOSSUTH and renewed by Tito and DIMITROV in the 1940s. New organisational framework of closer co-operation between the three states was to be found in the 'BREZINSKI-plan' of 1989, in the proposals by the NÉMETH government for a 'small integration' within CMEA in 1990 and in similar concepts of President VÁCLAV HAVEL and Polish leaders. The ideas of other forms of sub-regional or cross-border co-operation as e.g. the Carpathian Euro-region (with the participation of the four countries, the Ukraine and Romania) emerged also in the beginning of the nineties.

In sum: we can state with evidence that in the beginning of the 1990s, the three, later four countries satisfied all the criteria of sub-regional cohesiveness. Consequently, it was not by chance but a natural process that the new state leaders realised the historical necessities and, 656 years after the first Visegrad meeting of their kings, convened the new Visegrad Summit which took place on February 15, 1991.

## **THE VISEGRAD FOUR: GROUP OF THE MOST ADVANCED IN TRANSITION**

In the Visegrad Declaration, a series of common values, principles and objectives were identified along with concrete joint actions to be taken by the participating governments. The latter included e.g. measures to facilitate the free flow of goods, services, capital and workforce, to promote mutually advantageous intra-trade relations and promote foreign capital inflow in the region, to enhance co-operation in infrastructural development, environment protection, cultural exchange and direct co-operation on local self-government level. In the document, special emphasis was given to issues of common security and the assurance of the rights of national minorities. One of the main directions of the Group's

activities was aimed at the harmonisation of the countries' efforts to establish close co-operations with the European institutions. Regular meetings and consultations on different level were envisaged as main forms of implementation of the objectives.

In the ten-year history of Visegrad Group three periods can be separated. The first covered 1991 and 1992 when the system of consultations between heads of states, prime ministers, lower ranking officials and local government functionaries became cristallised and regular talks started in political, economic, military, social, cultural and other fields. In this period, it seemed to be unanimously accepted that interests of the participating countries towards European institutions can be represented more efficiently on joint level and full membership in NATO and EC can be achieved through harmonised efforts rather than competition and rivalry. This common understanding became further strengthened by the signing of the Association Agreements (Europe Agreements) of the three countries with the EC on December 16, 1991.

However, in the second stage (1993-1997), conditions changed significantly. Shortly after the separation of Czechoslovakia, the political cohesion of the Group weakened due to new trends in the development of certain participating countries. Based on very promising macro-economic indicators of the Czech Republic, highly appreciated also by Western observers, official sources of that country started to question the necessity of harmonised accession policies giving preference to individual action. Other statements characterised the Visegrad Forum as an inefficient, almost declarative project forced upon the countries concerned by the EU for bureaucratic reasons. This divergence of positions led to the degradation of the importance of all kinds of co-operation other than economic and commercial, consequently, the established fora of quadrilateral consultations hardly existed in the subsequent years. Thus the second period can be regarded as the exclusive epoch of CEFTA, markedly expressed by a slogan often used by the media „*Visegrad is dead, long live CEFTA!*”

Inspite of all this, the Group achieved, in the first years of its existence, at least three undeniable results. First of all, it accelerated the process of dissolution of the structures of the Eastern Bloc, without replacing them by similar forms of pseudo-integration but offering new and organic frames for subregional co-operation. Secondly, it served as a framework of identification and separation of a couple of ECE countries which proved to be the most advanced and prepared for close co-operation with NATO and EU. As Czech Foreign Minister JAN KAVAN stated, „V4 helped to present a positive picture of post-Communist Central Europe to the democratic world. The member-states showed their abilities to develop peacefully and their will to co-operate in a sensitive part of Europe and in a tense and

unstable period of time.”<sup>5</sup> Thirdly, Visegrad economic diplomacy succeeded to establish a multilateral commercial network in the region named Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA).

## CEFTA: A SUCCESSFUL INITIATIVE

The CEFTA Agreement was signed on December 21, 1992 in Cracow. Beside factors of economic cohesion mentioned above, the participants were also motivated by the fear that, after Association Agreements with EU came into force and industrial tariffs became partly eliminated, the three countries, unless they conclude an agreement with similar terms, could face relative disadvantages in each other's market. So the CEFTA agreement has been tightly connected with the state of its signatories' relations with the European Union, since the moment of its conclusion.

The basic objective of the Agreement was mutual liberalisation of intra-trade and the development of economic co-operation. It declared the signatories' common desire to participate in the process of European economic integration. It included the enlargement of trade relations between member states, creation of conditions for correct business competition and contribution to the harmonic development of world trade. One of the basic principles of the document envisaged the gradual abolition of tariffs and non-tariff barriers from intra-trade in industrial goods by January 1, 2001, while in the field of agricultural trade the document contained only concessions. Another article emphasised the principle of symmetry ensuring global equilibrium of mutual preferences. It was clearly fixed that the preferences provided by the agreement have to be at least equal to those stipulated in the signatories' individual association agreements with the EU.

After more than 6 years of its existence, a few assessing remarks can be made about CEFTA's main achievements.

- One of the basic aims of creating CEFTA was to stop the rapid shrinking of East- Central European countries' intra trade. Rapid liberalisation of intra-trade exceeded even the initial expectations. 90% of industrial trade between the member countries has been done duty free since the beginning of 1997, the remaining 10% (sensitive products) will gradually become exempt from duty by 2001. (The timing is important because the deadline is the same both in the EU Association

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<sup>5</sup> Slovak Trade Forum, Journal of Foreign Trade Support, Slovak Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Bratislava, 1998, p. 20.

Agreements and in the EFTA industrial and free trade agreements with CEFTA countries.) The issue of agricultural trade is more complex. Since 1996, a spectacular liberalisation has taken place in this field as well, and some kind of preferential tariffs now applies to 80% of these products. The positive effect of tariff reduction is that today the share of CEFTA is approximately the same as that of Russia in the individual countries' trade but the CEFTA seems to be a larger market with better prospects.

As a result, substantial growth can be seen in the exports and imports between member countries. As it is shown by figures of Tables 1 and 2, Hungary's trade turnover with its CEFTA partners was two and a half times higher in 1998 than in 1993. The volume of mutual capital investments and joint ventures has also been growing considerably (more than 650 joint ventures have been established with Slovakia alone).

- Another positive result of the CEFTA is that, according to the initial objectives, it has facilitated the reorientation of foreign trade of its members and managed to eliminate the previously predominant one-sided dependence on the East (both from the input and the output side). Trade between CEFTA member states makes up around 10% of their general average turnover (the Slovakian – Czech figure is higher for historical reasons) and the most dominant part (70-80%) of their trade is done with OECD, including 65-70% with the EU.

In re-structuring their foreign trade pattern, Visegrad countries (the four founding members of the CEFTA) have showed great adaptability. Between 1992-95 they made up for 27% in the EU's external imports growth, and their share in EU imports increased from 2% to nearly 6% between 1989 and 1996.<sup>6</sup> During the 1990s, the commodity structure of CEFTA countries' foreign trade changed radically. The share of machine industry and manufactured products has increased in the non-CEFTA exports of the four countries. However, it has to be observed that intra trade within CEFTA is far from reflecting the same tendency: the share of raw materials and semi-manufactured goods is still significant in the trade turnover between member countries.

- CEFTA was created by the will of the founders to enhance their economic development and growth. However, only few believed in the positive results of the four years between 1993 and 1997. In the CEFTA countries, economic growth exceeded the EU average, markets grew fast, intra relations deepened. Beside intra trade, member countries became similarly important partners of EU: in 1998, Poland was the 7<sup>th</sup>,

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<sup>6</sup> Inotai András - interview in Magyar Hírlap 17. January 1997

the Czech Republic the 9<sup>th</sup> and Hungary the 10<sup>th</sup> in the list of the Union's most important external partners.

- Thus CEFTA co-operation has not led to introversion, nor has it slowed down its members' integration to the EU. The primary aim of each member country remained EU-admission and subregional co-operation could be regarded as part of this process. CEFTA membership by itself means no guarantee whatsoever for joining the EU, nor can CEFTA be seen as an alternative to the EU. It is not the „entrance hall” nor „foreroom” rather the „training room” of the EU, where the participating ECE countries prepare themselves for EU membership through subregional co-operation.
- An important result of CEFTA co-operation is the broadening of the issues of integration (e.g. competition policy, rules on origins, etc.) the establishment of entrance regulations and the improvement of operations. Measures have been taken to develop trade in services, towards the liberalisation of the conditions for the flow of capital and the common acceptance of the results of quality control examinations.
- The positive results of the CEFTA are demonstrated in the fact that 3 of its participants have become OECD members (The Czech Republic in 1995, Hungary and Poland in 1996). No doubt, OECD membership is not a declared pre-condition of joining the EU, however, not a single country outside that organisation could enter the European integration so far. It was not by chance that out of the six first round candidates to EU five were already members of OECD and three of them were admitted to NATO earlier this year.
- A further favourable development has been the enlargement of the agreement. In their Declaration of November 25, 1994, Prime Ministers of the founder countries expressed their openness to all Central European countries which „will have association agreements with the European Union, will be GATT contracting parties and will get approval by all of the CEFTA members.”<sup>7</sup> Interest in CEFTA is shown by the joining of Slovenia, the most developed ex-Yugoslavian republic in 1996, then the entry of Romania in April 1997 and Bulgaria in 1998. There are other countries in the region turning towards the Agreement such as, Croatia, Lithuania and even the Ukraine has declared such intentions.
- Finally, it is a marking achievement of CEFTA that it could adhere to its original objectives and preserve its character as a free trade agreement. Suggestion to extend the agreement to free movement of workforce, services and capital emerged from certain countries but finally member states came to the conclusion that the CEFTA should not be developed

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<sup>7</sup> Declaration of Prime Ministers of the CEFTA countries, Poznan - 25.11.1994. Press Informacja Prasowa, Buro Prasowe Rzadu, Warszawa, 1994.



into an organisation similar to the EU. All these results were achieved without CEFTA having an administrative apparatus or permanent headquarters. The institutionalisation of CEFTA, e.g. the setting up of a permanent Secretariat could be regarded as changing the loose and flexible character of the co-operation.

By the end of the 1990s, the idea of Visegrad Co-operation rose to the surface again. Three of the founders of the Group, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, described by both NATO and EU as functioning democracies and market economies were qualified as first-circle-candidates for accession. Their accession talks started with NATO in 1997 and the three states were granted full membership in March 1999. Accession negotiations including *acquis* screening started with EU in March 1998 followed by substantial negotiations going on from November of the same year on EU-conformity along 31 chapters of Community rules. The probable date of joining has been so far envisaged only in terms of a mutual 'working hypothesis' which could mean a minimum three-year waiting period from now, until admission. No observer or analyst can thus predict the exact date of full membership, however, all of them are unanimous in pointing out that the years ahead are expected to be the period of difficult tasks of preparation on one hand and sensitive diplomatic encounters on the other.

These new developments made the leaders of the countries realise the importance of the re-vitalisation of subregional co-operation. Motives of this could be listed for long, let us only point out three of them. The first group of factors concern the security environment. Impacts of the Russian economic crisis and the new round of the Yugoslavian conflicts drew the attention of the V4 states to the importance of regional security. New security risks emerged or became acute in the second half of the nineties. Co-operation became of vital significance e.g. to handle regional effects of organised crime, illegal migration, trade in drugs or environmental damages. Protection of state borders and fulfilling Schengen requirements (including their financial consequences) also necessitate joint action.

The other set of new tasks comes from the common position of the candidate countries in the process of Euro-atlantic accession. Preparation for integration as well as accession talks with EU require regular sharing of experiences with each other via consultations and coordination. As it was put by Slovakian Minister of Foreign Affairs EDUARD KUKAN in an interview last December: „Currently, the aim is to renew the original idea of harmonisation of the integration steps, yet in a new and more intense dimension of co-operation. Co-ordination and common approach means stronger position at the negotiations with the European Union.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Slovak Trade Forum, Journal of Foreign Trade Support, Slovak Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Bratislava, 1998, pp. 18-21.

Finally, a very strong motive of the revival of V4 was the common desire to include Slovakia in the Group again and promote its European integration. Though the transition results and economic performance of Slovakia were acknowledged by the country opinion (AVIS) published at the Amsterdam Summit in summer 1997, Slovakia was not registered in the first round of EU and NATO candidates, basically for non-economic reservations. In the common opinion of the partners, the soonest possible catching up of Slovakia to the first round of candidates would serve the interest of the whole region while its long-term stay away could negatively affect both security and trade interests.

Since the CEFTA Summit held in September 1998 in Prague and joined by the new Slovakian government after the election, all previously existing *fora* of political consultation have been re-established and systematic exchange of ideas and experiences started again. Slovakia, a founder of the Group, occupied its full and legitimate place again among the participants. On the latest summit meeting of the Prime Ministers of the four countries held in May 1999 in Bratislava, new tasks of Visegrad co-operation were fixed. The participants agreed on the coordination of the harmonisation of their legal systems with the European Union and direct co-operation between their regions. It was decided that two meetings will be held annually on Prime Ministers' level to discuss concrete issues of co-operation which would cover, among other fields, setting up contacts at all levels of central and local administration, business promotion through direct contacts between chambers of commerce, cultural, sport and youth exchanges, common training of diplomats, etc. The summit paid special attention to Slovakia expressing its firm commitment and support to the country's European integration. By, this the Visegrad 4 was reorganised and entered the third stage of its history.

The re-birth of the group gave a strong impetus to bilateral co-operation as well. For example, the Slovakian Prime Minister Mr MIKULÁS DZURINDA and his Hungarian colleague Mr VIKTOR ORBÁN met 8 times during the last 12 month, predominantly on Visegrad and CEFTA occasions. It offered good opportunities to discuss common projects of wide range, from environment protection and employment policies up to the joint restoration of the Esztergom-Sturovo bridge supported by PHARE. Regular high level monitoring of bilateral relations certainly contributed to the growth of trade between the two countries by 14% within the past 12 month. At the talks, it was repeatedly stated by the Hungarian side that Hungary considers Slovakia as its important strategic partner and will do its utmost to support that country's integration efforts which fully coincide with Hungarian national interests. The meetings gave positive stimulus also to such bi- and trilateral initiatives such as the Vienna-

Bratislava-Győr 'Golden Triangle' and the recently adopted Vah-Danube-Ipoly Euro-region.

In conclusion, a few important features of the first 7-8 years of V4 and CEFTA will be summarised:

- The two networks are natural and organic. Both are created by traditional regional cohesion and new developments in ECE on the turn of 1980s and 1990s. They proved to be long lasting and capable of surviving difficult periods and challenges.
- Both of them can be regarded, in final analysis, successful, because they positively contributed to the security and co-operation in the region on the one hand and to the transformation and stabilisation of national economies and trade relations, on the other.
- Both of them have been playing an important role in the integration process of the participating ECE countries into the Euro-Atlantic structures. However, they can not be regarded as a competitive or substitutory alternative to NATO and EU-membership, rather as additional, complementary opportunities for co-operation.
- The idea of Visegrad is more than a mere initiative for trade liberalisation and regional co-operation. In the words of Mr JÁNOS MARTONYI, Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs, „Visegrad carries a strong, substantial political message. It is a symbol representing the spiritual unity of the middle European nations. It reflects our common political heritage, our sharing of history, our remarkably similar dreams and identical aspirations”<sup>9</sup>. By now it has become much more than tradition, it is a natural co-operation of small ECE states, connected also by bonds of hopefully common future.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.23.

*Table 1*  
*Hungary's trade relations with CEFTA countries*

Exports	Value (M USD)										In % of the previous year					98/98 %
	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1996	1997	1998		
Czech R.	169,0	197,7	207,4	289,7	321,6	372,1	117,0	104,9	139,7	111,0	115,7	111,0	111,0	115,7	220,2	
Poland	162,7	222,0	337,1	387,8	510,4	529,4	136,4	151,9	115,0	131,6	103,7	115,0	131,6	103,7	325,4	
Romania	184,9	197,2	357,5	277,6	316,7	564,3	106,7	181,2	77,7	114,1	178,2	77,7	114,1	178,2	305,2	
Slovakia	127,7	143,6	213,1	251,0	265,3	332,3	112,5	148,4	117,8	105,7	125,3	117,8	105,7	125,3	260,2	
Slovenia	138,8	196,0	255,9	220,0	290,8	241,0	141,2	130,6	86,0	132,2	82,9	86,0	132,2	82,9	173,6	
Total	783,2	956,6	1371,0	1426,0	1704,8	2039,1	122,1	143,3	104,0	119,5	119,6	104,0	119,5	119,6	260,4	
including																
founders	459,5	563,3	757,7	928,5	1097,3	1233,9	122,6	134,5	122,5	118,2	112,4	122,5	118,2	112,4	268,5	
joiners	323,7	393,2	613,3	497,5	607,6	805,2	121,5	156,0	81,1	122,1	132,5	81,1	122,1	132,5	248,7	

Table 1 (cont'd)  
Hungary's trade relations with CEFTA countries

Imports	Value (M USD)								In % of the previous year								98/93 %
	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	
Czech R.	264,0	347,4	364,0	487,4	509,7	553,0	131,6	104,8	133,9	104,6	108,5	209,5					
Poland	148,1	193,3	248,4	298,4	358,3	459,5	130,5	128,5	120,1	120,1	128,3	310,3					
Romania	86,4	119,0	130,2	146,5	154,9	185,7	137,6	109,4	112,6	105,7	119,9	214,9					
Slovakia	237,6	355,6	369,7	382,2	401,4	428,1	149,7	104,0	103,4	105,0	106,7	180,2					
Slovenia	62,3	80,4	92,8	88,8	109,6	140,0	129,1	115,4	95,6	123,5	127,7	224,7					
Total	798,4	1095,7	1205,1	1403,2	1534,0	1766,3	137,2	110,0	116,4	109,3	115,1	221,2					
including																	
founders	649,7	896,4	982,2	1167,9	1269,5	1440,7	138,0	109,6	118,9	108,7	113,5	221,7					
joiners	148,8	199,4	223,0	235,3	264,6	325,7	134,0	111,8	105,5	112,4	123,1	218,9					

Source: Hungary's foreign trade statistics in 1993-1998, Ministry of International Economic Relations, Ministry of Industry, Trade and Tourism, Ministry of Economy.