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Support for Democracy by the V4 Countries: Can Cooperation Be Improved?

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The countries of the Visegrad Group (or the V4, composed of Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) have recently emerged as new actors in support for democracy in other countries. Even though they engage mostly in their closest neighbourhood (the Eastern Partnership countries and the Western Balkans), they also try to be active in supporting democracy in other parts of the world, for example, in Tunisia and Egypt. Closer cooperation in democracy promotion among the V4 not only would demonstrate their commitment and improve the effectiveness of their support for these countries but also would their engagement be more visible and strengthen their message at the EU level.

A democratisation agenda that includes activities such as supporting the rule of law, strengthening civil society and sharing systemic transformation experiences with other countries is carried out by all of the V4 members. The agenda is implemented through bilateral cooperation (i.e., activities are carried out by national entities) and multilateral channels (i.e., regional and international institutions and organisations such as the United Nations and its agencies, the European Union, and the International Visegrad Fund). The Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the countries are responsible for planning and coordinating the agenda, while the projects are implemented through such entities as other government departments, embassies abroad (via so called small grant funds), civil society organisations and development agencies.

Financial and Organisational Shortcomings. Support for democracy has become one of the main goals of development assistance for Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. This is reflected in Poland's and Slovakia's Development Cooperation Plans and in Hungary's Resolution on International Development Cooperation. The Czech Republic has even set up a separate instrument for it—the Transition Promotion Programme administrated by the Human Rights & Transition Policy Department at the Czech MFA. The V4, however, still face some challenges that inhibit the implementation of democratisation policy. First, financial shortcomings should be brought into focus. The total aid provided by V4 members for democracy projects is around €7.7 million, which amounts to “a tiny drop in the aid business” (1% of total official development assistance spending). Compare this to the estimated €17.7 million given by Sweden. In 2012, the most generous V4 donor for bilateral democracy promotion assistance was Poland (€4.4 million), followed by the Czech Republic (€1.9 million), Slovakia (€800,000) then Hungary (€600,000, according to the latest statistics from 2008).

Second, a model for institutional coordination of the democratisation agenda within the foreign ministries has not yet been worked out. As a result, monitoring and assessment of the effectiveness of their activities has been limited. It is worth mentioning, however, the model created by the Czech Republic, which as early as 2005 established the Transition Promotion Programme. This solution allowed for the planning and organising of activities within the democratisation agenda in a more coherent way as well as increased the transparency of the planning process and the implementation of projects. Additionally, it enabled separating democracy assistance from development aid. One has to admit that in 2011, Poland and Slovakia also created democracy support/development cooperation agencies (such as the Solidarity Fund PL) and a programme that funds “pro-democracy” projects (the Centre for Transfer of Experiences from Integration and Reforms). Nevertheless they are both funded from the development assistance

budget. AidWatch, a pan-European advocacy and campaigning network of NGOs that monitors the quality and quantity of aid provided, points out that linking democracy aid with development assistance does not necessarily reflect the main objective of EU development cooperation as stated in the Lisbon Treaty, which is the eradication of poverty.

Experience with V4 Cooperation. Due to particular political, economic and security interests, as well as historical and cultural ties with other countries, the V4 members tend to conduct democratisation policy on their own. This can be observed on at least three levels. The first is in their geographical priorities. The V4 have only three priority countries in common—Moldova, Tunisia and Ukraine. The second is in their thematic areas of support. Each of the V4 members underlines the uniqueness of its own systemic transformation, which may imply that they support only those sectors they consider important from the perspective of their own transformation experience. Relying on their development plans and the information provided on their websites, one may observe that support for defenders of human rights is a longstanding element of Czech foreign policy. Hungary, for instance, favours projects that especially emphasise minority rights. Slovakia, on the other hand, is uniquely invested in the development of groups that monitor media and elections. Meanwhile, Poland supports the development of structures of local democracy and civil society.

The next place of differentiation is in their limited cooperation at the EU level. Even though the countries (in particular Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia) participate actively in the formulation of EU democratisation policy and try to attract the attention of the EU Member States to priorities in their geographical areas (such as the Eastern Partnership and the Western Balkans), they hardly coordinate their activities and positions, which might otherwise demonstrate their commitment to support for democracy and strengthen their message at the EU level. Little cooperation between the V4 could be noticed during the process to establish the European Endowment for Democracy (EED). The idea for the EED came from Poland and was initially supported (in August 2012) only by Slovakia, which offered a €60,000 voluntary contribution. In December 2012, Hungary also pledged a financial contribution, in the amount of €20,000.

Positive outcomes of their cooperation are in projects created within the International Visegrad Fund (with a budget of €7 million as of 2012). These projects mainly are grant programmes such as the Visegrad+ (for the Western Balkans) or the V4 Eastern Partnership Programme (V4EP), which have as their main purposes, respectively, to contribute to the democratisation and transformation processes in the selected countries and regions and to provide access to the experiences of the democratic transformation of the V4 states. Additionally, scholarship programmes such as the In-Coming Scholarships and the Intra-Visegrad Scholarships, awarded to citizens of the regions of focus.

Recommendations. Due to the limited funds of the V4 for support of democracy in other countries, it may be better if there were closer coordination of V4 activities and projects, foremost in their closest neighbourhood but also in other parts of the world, for example, in Egypt or Tunisia, or even in Cuba or Burma/Myanmar, where the Czech Republic and Poland are already active. This could not only increase the effectiveness of their support but also reduce the fragmentation of development aid (and simultaneously, democracy assistance). This initiative was outlined in the EU Code of Conduct on the Division of Labour in Development Policy in 2007, which recommends an increase in cooperation among the EU Member States through common programming, implementation and co-financing.

As it holds the presidency of the Visegrad Group now, Poland could try to propose the implementation of projects among its fellow countries by suggesting a geographical and thematic approach. This means the coordination of V4 activities in countries common to all (e.g., Moldova, Ukraine and Tunisia) or even some specific to several members (Libya in the case of Poland and Slovakia, and Egypt for the Czech Republic and Slovakia), and to agree on the thematic areas in which each country wishes to engage (for example, good governance or civil society support). The V4 countries also could aim for better cooperation between their development agencies (for example, by sharing information about the current situation in another country as well as about present or future projects). This kind of cooperation already is in place between the Czech Republic and Sweden. On 14 July 2011, they signed a memorandum of understanding that aims for greater harmonisation of common donor activities in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

There is potential for closer cooperation also with the newly created European Endowment for Democracy, in which all V4 countries are represented. The coordination of the positions of the Board of Governors, which is responsible for the endowment's budget and the planning of thematic and geographic areas, could guarantee more financial aid to high priority countries. Finally, besides the coordination of support for democracy in other countries they could share with their respective ministries their experiences and the practical solutions they've discovered for more effective democracy assistance. Additionally, they could learn from more experienced donors (for example, using the V4-Plus format with the Nordic or Benelux countries).