

# Human Rights Dimension of the V4 Countries' Foreign Development Assistance in Governmental Declarations

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**Abstract:** *The text deals with the human rights dimension of the foreign development assistance policies of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary and focuses in detail on the official governmental documents. Given the historical experience with the transformation of the society these countries are well equipped to pass it on to the currently undemocratic regimes that violate basic human rights. The core question is whether and how do the states reflect in their foreign policies the human rights and the assistance to civil societies which are understood as a basic prerequisite for a stable state. The article raises the question: which of the V4 countries is the most advanced and specific in this aspect. It also seeks which states do implement their official declarations. In the conclusion it summarizes that the Czech Republic has new effective tools to work with civil society and Slovakia as well as Poland proclaimed plans to support good governance. Future practice will show how the plans transform into practice. Hungary, the less specific about its strategy, is rather difficult to analyze.*

**Keywords:** *Human rights, foreign development assistance policy, transformation experience, democratization, civil society*

## Introduction

This paper deals with the assistance to the building of the civil society in target countries and thus supporting the respect to the concept of human rights, as these policies are mentioned in the governmental documents.<sup>1</sup> In such a small space it is not possible to make a deep analysis of the complex dimension of the Visegrad group countries' foreign development assistance; the paper is based on the documents specified in the first note. The aim is to present the general governmental frame of foreign assistance with human rights aspects regarding the official governmental documents. The time frame can be specified by the creation of the new governments in power in the moment (autumn 2010) and their policy statements and guidelines, not having the ambition to compare it in detail with the previous administrations' policies. The data pool is rather limited, given the author's intention to focus on the state actors approach. Non-state actors have been omitted, even if the state and its institutions are not the only actors, and sometimes even not the principal providers of foreign development assistance. The author is fully aware of the fact that the official declarations are different from the practical implementation; however, this evaluation is not a goal of this paper.

Analyzing the governmental documents leads one to ask a consequent question: which of the governmental documents is the most advanced and concrete regarding the human rights promotion and support for the civil societies within the frame of foreign assistance. The author presumes that the Czech Republic is the most progressive, within the V4 group, in terms of providing foreign assistance focused on the human rights dimension and civil society building.

The theoretical frame of the paper is a description and comparison of the official documents of respective governments in the field of human rights and civil society foreign assistance. Within the comparison attention is paid to the particular specification of the strategy, contrasting with vague declarations lacking any practical strategies. The paper firstly focuses on the ideological and historical reasons for the specified assistance and then proceeds directly to the description of the particular states' policies.<sup>2</sup>

## Reasons for human rights support

The historical experience with non-democratic regimes and disrespect towards elementary human rights leads Central European countries to play the role of supporter of similar processes in countries that still suffer under regimes that have no respect to the rights of its citizens. The actors are attempting to generalize the experience gained during the transformation and pass it on to other countries in a similar

situation. (e.g. Pithart 2005:3). Know-how gained during the recent transition of societal and economical structure gives these countries a comparative advantage for being able to share authentic 'process instructions' and offer moral support to dissidents.<sup>3</sup>

Another remarkable reason to grant assistance is the fact that V4 countries have joined the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and have thus passed from recipients to the donors' category (Dauderstädt 2003: 10), paying to others for the help they had got from then developed countries that had enabled the democratization process in Central Europe.<sup>4</sup>

According to the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, given the very fact, that these countries joined the European Union (EU) in 2004, there are further bounds to cooperate with the civil society, because the promotion of democratic values, protection of basic rights and strengthening civil societies in partner countries has been declared a priority of the EU (Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2008: 1–2). In this respect the membership of V4 countries in EU has created a synergetic effect since one of the topics they brought to the EU was the transition experience, on the other side the EU brought the momentum needed for its promotion. V4 countries are coming near to the general EU and OECD donor standard (Hanspach 2010: 3). However each of the examined countries differs in its strategy and policy, as well as in countries of focus. Relatively new phenomenon that emerged during the campaigns advocating on behalf of human rights is the support for civil society, which was strengthened by the joining countries.

## The Czech Republic as a champion for human rights

The title refers to the explicit endeavor of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reflected in the program: '*The government considers support for human rights and fundamental freedoms as one of the high-profile themes of Czech foreign policy.*' (Government of the Czech Republic 2010: 12). This proclamation is unique among the V4 countries diplomatic declarations, giving the Czech diplomacy instruments for defending basic human rights, freedom of speech and the media. There is a strong emphasis on devoted support for the development of civil society. Competent civic structures are seen as a necessary condition for building the rule of law and subsequently establishing democratic institutions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic (2010a: 5).

Building upon the historical experience with the external support for dissidents, who during Communism dared to establish alternative social network, there is a strong will to 'pay the debt' to those who are in need nowadays (Pithart 2005: 3). There are two parallel lines within the foreign policy. The first is the *Development*

Policy, which is generally unconditional and its delivery does not depend upon respect for human rights in the recipient country. The second line, which is extraordinary, is the *Transformation* Policy which complements the development assistance with instruments that promote fundamental freedoms and the rule of law as they are considered to be prerequisites of prosperity and stability for any country (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic (2010a).

The most significant target group of these instruments is the civil society in countries of focus for Czech foreign policy. Active members of civic movements are supported in the following countries of focus which include for example: Burma, Belarus, Georgia and Serbia (Transformation cooperation: 2010)<sup>5</sup>. The principal attention is paid to the development of social networks that have certain potential of functioning in conditions of an incompetent state. Czech strategy uses the tools of training in particular procedures from the transformation experience that could be applied in given country, as well as supplying materially and financially those who have their own projects to work in the society ((Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic (2010b: 2).

Together with the Development Policy, the assistance offered to the mentioned countries does not omit the human rights dimension — on the contrary — gives it certain level of priority. The new government that was established in July 2010 has made a substantial contribution to this shift of foreign policy and put the emphasis on the democracy promotion accompanied by the respect to the human rights (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Czech Republic 2010: 4).

## **Poland Expanding its Policy**

The Polish government which was installed in 2007 is center-right and it has expanded the assistance tools regarding human rights compared to the previous administrations. The policy was introduced already by the previous administration as the *New Strategy for Polish Foreign Assistance* (Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2006) but has not specified any tools. Next to granting the humanitarian relief that was formerly covered by Polish Aid, it is now broader and it comprises support for the democracy building and civil society structures as well. The most important aspect of the Polish program is *Good Governance*<sup>6</sup> (Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2010a) and observance of human rights and fundamental civil liberties (Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2010b)<sup>7</sup>. The emphasis is put on promoting and strengthening the institutions created by an independent civil society.

Civil society is perceived as a guarantee that human rights will be respected. The *New strategy* was established in order to expand the portfolio of activities realized on the field of foreign assistance broader than the traditionally implemented develop-

ment assistance in a strict sense. The new approach, mainly focused on the Eastern European countries, should include democracy-promoting related activities. The reason for such a shift in policy was closer cooperation between the EU and OECD in terms of a synergetic effect regarding assistance programming, therefore increasing the efficiency (Mihálik 2010: 12).

There are two branches of beneficiaries, according to the type of aid provided. The first one is Eastern Partnership countries, a very important dimension that includes the Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova and Georgia. Civil societies in these states have been receiving support for empowerment. The assistance provided to the second group, i.e., Afghanistan, Angola and Palestinian Autonomy is rather development-like (Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2010a).

Polish foreign policy is clearly defined and proclaims its support for the civil society structures related to human rights support, mainly in respect towards its eastern neighbors.

## **Slovakia, a visible shift**

Slovakia has been providing development assistance since 2003 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic); however, it has never been a priority for past governments. The situation changed significantly with the new government installation in August 2010. The new program document of Ministry of Foreign Affairs stipulates human rights and democracy policy significantly more than any predecessor (Government of Slovak Republic 2010: 50–54). Given the fact that it has been newly established, there are no specific tools for its implementation mentioned and has a short practical experience.

The framework is multilateral, not based on direct bilateral support granted by the Slovak government. The forums of cooperation are United Nations and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2010: 10–12).

The major source of limitation in the aspect of assistance scope provided is, quite unsurprisingly, a low budget. The official tool of the Ministry for development assistance is Slovak Aid (Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2006). According to the diploma thesis of Ondřej Gažovič analyzing Slovak Aid, the motives used to be rather practical than altruistic, searching for economic relations and possible future partners (Gažovič 2008: 79). However, the same may also hold true in other cases, just trying to seem to be altruist.

In order to support a sustainable development in the beneficiary countries, the Slovak Republic outlined four sector priorities. Passing on the transformation experience and know-how of reform process (such as democratization, rule of law

and development of the civil society) to the countries that currently live under undemocratic regimes, is one of the four sector priorities that have been declared in the Strategy of Development Aid for years 2009–2013 (SlovakAid 2009: 13–14). Partner states are divided into two groups, according to the relevance and priority for the government. In the first line, where the assistance is more intense, there is Serbia given the importance and strategic interests in Balkan, African continent is represented by Kenya and last but not the least, comes Afghanistan with a project to assist the young state and its society (Slovak Aid 2010).

Other partners, called project countries, are situated mainly in the Balkans and Central Asia, among them is Ukraine, no less important (Mihálik 2010: 14). As the most influential neighbor is Russia, one of the explicitly mentioned interests of Slovakia is that this powerful state becomes modern, pluralistic and democratic. There is cooperation with Russian civil society and Slovak civil sector, since if the strong power from the East becomes stabilized and predictable, important question mark can be removed from the Slovak politics (Government of the Slovak Republic 2010: 52–53).

Generally analyzing the Slovak foreign policy's human rights dimension, it can be concluded that the *modus operandi* is still to be stabilized and the coherent strategy has yet to come to practice and become routine.

## Hungary building democracy

Development cooperation has represented one of the basic values of Hungarian foreign policy since spring of 2008; however more emphasis was put on it with the new government that specified the tools. Its character is more of a technical cooperation regarding the transfer of practical knowledge and experience with the change of a political system (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Hungary 2009).

Great importance is attached to human rights for historical and geographical reasons, mainly to the process of strengthening democratic institutions. As in the cases of previously mentioned countries, Hungary also shares experience associated with their political-economic transition (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Hungary 2006: 3) The main focus is put on the democracy building projects, starting from the grass-roots. A majority of the programs implemented in bilateral relations is either educational or training. The primary aim was the practical transfer of the proper experience gained during the transition towards democracy to the partner country.

The humanitarian goal of partnership is to reduce poverty, but there is also stress put on helping the democratic process and development of civil societies. External relations and the diplomatic concentration shift the human rights assistance mainly to

the regional partners such as Serbia, Belarus, Moldova, Albania and Kosovo (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Hungary 2009: 8). Bosnia and Herzegovina receive a portion of the aid, but more likely humanitarian, just up to 10 % is specified to support the civil society. The explicit support to democracy mentioned is to be accomplished in Cuba, Kazakhstan, Palestinian Authority, Burma and very specifically in North Korea which is a territory where not many countries dare to operate officially (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Hungary 2009). The list of the countries as specified above is rather ambitious; however no specific projects corresponding to these states are presented and no particular strategy is available, leading to the conclusion that declarations may be ahead of the implementation in practice.

## Conclusion

All the new governments implement the shift towards paying more attention to human rights and the democracy building process in currently undemocratic regimes within their foreign policies. These policies and type of assistance complement the humanitarian assistance provided to developing countries. The reason for sharing such knowledge is historical, given the more or less successful democratization. The choice to cooperate with specific countries has geopolitical reasons as well since the partner countries are often located in the strategic neighborhood, as in the case of the Balkan countries, Belarus or Russia. The main cross points of the foreign assistance of V4 countries are the Eastern Partnership and cooperation in the Balkans (Hanspach 2010: 3).

The major turn in declaration is apparent in Slovakia, where the specific tools have been created with the new administration; however it is still limited and has had a short practice for bearing its fruit. Before a proper evaluation is possible, more time for implementation is needed. On the other hand the Czech Republic has used human rights and transition policies as a type of 'trademark' for more than five years. In practical terms there exists a specialized department within the Czech MFA dealing with transformation and human rights issues in partner countries.

Recently there has been an evolution in Poland with the *New Strategy for Foreign Assistance* that is ever more interested in strong civil societies (meaning democratic, ruled by law and with increased civic participation in voluntary organizations) of the countries in the eastern region. Hungary is by far the less specific about its particular policies and tools; the only clear information is about their partner countries and sectoral priorities; however it does not contribute to making the practice concrete. Comparing all the governmental official documents, the conclusion is that the most specific and advanced approach towards the human rights dimension of the foreign development assistance is that of the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Besides the proper motivation of the governments, one external factor needs to be mentioned. Closer cooperation between EU member states and OECD has come to existence in the branch of development assistance programming and synergy effect. Such circumstances have made some of the governments change the existing approach towards purely development assistance activities and enabled the focus on historically experienced know-how and passed it on.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> By governmental documents as the principal sources of data the author means Official Policy Statements (as are the cases of the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic), Official Website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (in case of Poland and Hungary), all are mentioned below: Government of the Czech Republic (2010) 'Policy Statement of the Government of the Czech Republic'. Available at: [http://www.vlada.cz/assets/media-centrum/dulezite-dokumenty/Programove\\_prohlaseni\\_vlady.pdf](http://www.vlada.cz/assets/media-centrum/dulezite-dokumenty/Programove_prohlaseni_vlady.pdf) (Accessed on 12 October 2010).

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<sup>2</sup> Since the current status of the human rights practice is far from satisfying in all countries over the world, the supporters of human rights sponsor the promotion of the first generation. Regarding the promotion of human rights these countries in general primarily concentrate on the civil and political aspects as they are basic.

<sup>3</sup> By dissidents are ment those, who are against the system and organize certain form of opposition.

<sup>4</sup> One of the fundaments of the democratization process is respect towards basic human rights. The process begun with the Helsinki Conference and it was concluded by signing the document engaging signing parties to respect for human rights. This document, known as Helsinki Final Act, was a tool of leverage for the dissidents who were claiming respect of their rights from governments. (Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe 1975: 6–7).

- <sup>5</sup> Other countries of focus, and of the same importance, are Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cuba, Iraq, Kosovo, Moldova and Ukraine (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic 2010b: 1).
- <sup>6</sup> Good Governance has eight principal characteristics. 'It is participatory, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive and follows the rule of law.' (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (2010) 'What is Good Governance?' Available at: <http://www.unescap.org/pdd/prs/ProjectActivities/Ongoing/gg/governance.asp> (Accessed on 14 October 2010).
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