

The Strategic Case for V4 Democracy Assistance

Visegrad Platform for Dialogue on Democracy,
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Jan Hornát



Summary

Do the Visegrad states (V4) still believe in the virtues of democracy assistance? The aim of this paper is to shift focus from the normative foundations of democracy assistance (while not denouncing them) to the strategic benefits this activity can bring. This strategic argument is necessary in a period when certain V4 leaders are questioning the benefits of value-based or normative foreign policies. Democracy assistance needs to be viewed as a crucial investment into the future. It fosters transitional networks of like-minded political and social actors and creates potential dialogue partners prepared to engage with V4 or the EU at the outset of a transition process. Moreover, engagement with local trusted partners can help the given societies traverse the vulnerable initial phase of a transition and preserve stability. The apparent strategic role of the International Visegrad Fund (IVF) is to foster partnerships and networks of a wide array of local civil society actors, while focusing on the improvement and development of their capabilities.

Recommendations

- It is crucial to not only pay attention to the normative aspects of democracy assistance, but also to the *strategic* ones.
- Democracy assistance should foster transnational networks of like-minded political and social actors – these actors are potential *natural* partners for the EU in the event of transition.
- The strategic role of the IVF is to foster partnerships and networks of a wide array of local civil society actors focusing on the improvement and development of their capabilities.
- In the search for partners, a broader definition of civil should be adopted to include not only activist NGOs and individuals, but also businesses and grassroots political parties.
- The IVF should use its autonomy to the fullest possible extend and support projects that would otherwise be too politically sensitive for the V4 governments.
- The IVF should devote more support to independent journalism in Ukraine and the V4 states to tackle Russian misinformation campaigns.
- The IVF should consider providing grants to its most trusted partners.
- Through workshops and other activities, the IVF should help CSOs diversify their funding portfolio and introduce them to new and flexible forms of fundraising, such as crowdsourcing.
- Engaging with GONGOs can, in certain circumstances, be justified as these institutions usually represent elites close to domestic governments and which can serve as dialogue – if not *natural* – partners in the event of a crisis.

Can the V4 follow through on its successes?

Since the end of the Cold War and moreover since their accession to the European Union (EU), the Visegrad Group (V4) have established themselves as significant actors in the field of democracy assistance.¹ The EU patently welcomed this initiative as the national programs of V4 complemented policies that Brussels was carrying out itself. Furthermore, V4 countries were active in pushing this agenda to the forefront of EU external action when, for example, during the Czech Presidency of the EU Council in 2009 the Eastern Partnership (EaP) program was implemented and when European Endowment for Democracy (EED) was established in 2012 – a success mostly attributable to Poland. Also, within the EaP framework, the Civil Society Forum (CSF) was created which provides a significant platform for civil society organizations to monitor and discuss the development regarding democracy building and human rights development in six partnership countries. While the EaP operates with a budget provided through the European Neighborhood Instrument² (ENI) and does not focus solely on democracy assistance, the EED's main and essentially only task is to support civil society and nascent democratic initiatives around the world.

In spite of these laudable past efforts, current developments within the V4 states themselves are showing signs of political behavior that tries to bypass or even revoke democratic standards – be it Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's acclaim for "illiberal" democracy, Czech President Miloš Zeman's praise for China's ability to "control" its population or the new Polish government's sweeping changes of personnel in various state institutions ranging from the supreme court to public media. These activities may potentially damage the "transition narrative"³ on which V4 democracy assistance policies and programs have been based, as their credibility in the eyes of recipient states declines. Providing democracy assistance funding on the one hand while doubting the merits of democracy on the other does not create an atmosphere of trust between the recipient and the donor.

The ensuing question stands as follows: How can the V4 follow up on its successes (such as the establishment of the EaP and the EED) amidst the current political milieu in each of the four countries? Moreover, at a time is stuck in a geopolitical gridlock between the "West" and Russia, is there going to be will and ability on the part of the Visegrad states to influence, coordinate or support EU policy in the field of democracy assistance? To put it more broadly – does the V4 still believe in the virtues of democracy assistance?

The aim of this paper is not to directly answer the above-mentioned questions, but to go one step further and provide a strategic argument for the continuation of democracy assistance policies of the V4 countries. Given the subtle (and sometimes overt) rhetoric pointing to the deficiencies of democracy by various policy and decision makers in the V4, the following argument will be intentionally stripped of normative and value-laden pleas (while, of course, not denouncing them). Instead, adopting a rather realist perspective of international relations the paper will argue for democracy assistance policies on the grounds of rational benefits that such policies can provide to donor states.

¹ See Kucharczyk, Jacek, and Jeff Lovitt (eds.), *Democracy's New Champions: European Democracy Assistance after EU Enlargement* (Prague: Policy Association for an Open Society, 2008).

² ENI has replaced the European Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) in 2014.

³ That is, the ability of V4 states to be effective supporters of democratization by virtue of their transitional experience.

The thin line between normative and strategic goals

In general, the EU tends to communicate its democracy assistance initiatives as a normative, value-based policy. The strengthening of civil rights, bringing transparency and accountability to governments, supporting free media and freedom of speech, empowering minorities and making sure that societies in third world countries are governed by the same liberal and democratic standards as citizens of the EU is a type of *mission civilisatrice* that the EU has chosen to “mainstream” into all of its external activities.⁴ From this perspective, democracy assistance helps consolidate, reproduce and strengthen EU identity, which in turn is based on democracy, solidarity and the individual rights of man. Also, this normative basis tempts analysts to describe the EU as a “normative power” in world affairs.⁵ It would almost seem that the millions of euros invested in norm promotion, bring the EU little practical benefit beyond “good consciousness and good feeling”.

However, as Richard Youngs points out, this “focus on the ideational dimension of the EU’s international presence has unduly diverted attention away from the persistence of power politics instrumentalism”.⁶ In other words, *normative* dynamics are not the only factor that drive states’ (or the EU’s) foreign policy – there is also *strategic* dynamism that helps formulate these policies. Not only do these two dynamics co-exist, but they also inform and influence each other.

In this sense, it is crucial to not only pay attention to the normative aspects of democracy promotion, but also to the strategic ones. This means knowing how democracy assistance can be used instrumentally to benefit strategic interests of the V4, the EU and ultimately the interests of the recipient country. The given reasoning can be applied most pertinently to Ukraine, where democracy assistance is no longer just a normative goal – it is a strategic one. Needless to say, a functioning democratic state in Ukraine is vital for the security of the V4 and thus the stability of the entire EU. Even though at this point civil war in Ukraine seems to be consolidated in the eastern part of the country, any spillover of the geopolitical conflict would have grave consequences.

⁴ Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, “Human Rights and Democracy at the Heart of E External Action – Towards a More Effective Approach”, COM (2011) 886 final, available at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2011:0886:FIN:EN:PDF> (accessed 5 February, 2016).

⁵ This was most famously formulated by Ian Manners in “Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40 (2), 2002, 235-258.

⁶ This was most Youngs, Richard, “Normative Dynamics and Strategic Interests in the EU’s External Identity”, *Journal of Common Market Studies* 42 (2), 2004, 415-435.

Connecting with Potential Partner

In essence, it is possible to identify two basic cases of transition of political regimes:

1. A transition where an alternative group of leaders is formed and – with the consent of the majority of the population – ready to take over government of the country (e.g. this was the case of the transition in Czechoslovakia or Poland)
2. A transition where no consolidated alternative is formed and whereby various alternative groups of leaders compete to take over government, leading to fragmentation of the society, the political scene and the state in general (e.g. contemporary Libya, Syria, Egypt).

In the latter case, the society is rightly going to pose the question: what is the best alternative to the preceding regime? In the best case scenario, the society will choose this alternative in the free and fair elections, yet there is a reasonable chance that any hints of democracy will end with the first elections and the winning alternative will slip back into authoritarian (or even anarchic) rule (e.g. again the case of Libya). Similarly, states within the international community will pose an analogous question as the domestic society – who we connect with in such a moment? Which of the alternatives is our natural partner (i.e. a partner whose outlooks and interests align with our)?

Given the interconnectedness of today's global economy, nearly every state has some stake – be it economic, strategic or political – in every other state. Consequently, these questions are being posed even by states which claim non-interventionism in the domestic affairs of others. For example, with regards to the current development in Syria, Russia and Iran found a natural partner in the Asad regime, while the EU and the US are struggling to find one.

In such cases, democracy assistance may demonstrate itself to be a crucial investment into the future. Democracy promotion activities are known to foster transnational network of like-minded political activists, dissidents, stakeholders and institutions – these embrace similar norms and adhere to democratic principles of governance.⁷ Actors within these networks are thus potential natural partners for the EU, the US and other democracies, when their country faces a transition or is in midst of turmoil. The transnational networks are also great value to civil society actors themselves as they inherently support knowledge and experience sharing, trust-building, and their overall socialization.

It is necessary to admit that there is a hint of naiveté in this assumption as the presumed natural partner may turn its back on the donor in the event of a transition – this is of course an inevitable risk, which calls for thorough scrutiny of every recipient of democracy assistance. Nevertheless, such partners can be decisive in establishing relations with the nascent political regime and providing access to its policymakers. A dialogue partner prepared to engage with the V4 states of the EU at the outset of a transition process could potentially preclude a situation that has now culminated in Syria. This is obviously a strategic and not normative goal. The natural interest of the EU and the V4 is to have a stable and safe neighborhood, ideally occupied by countries with a democratically elected government. Thus in order to foster a stable neighborhood of shared prosperity and peace, which is to the benefit of the not only the EU, but also to the countries of the region, the EU needs local, long-term, vetted and trusted dialogue partners with whom it can work to reinstate stability in case of crisis.

⁷ See James M. Scott, "Transnationalizing democracy promotion: The role of Western political foundations and think-tanks", *Democratization* 6 (3), 1999, 146-170

This issue is linked to the question of working with the so-called “government organized non-governmental organizations” (GONGOs). EU democracy assistance is often directed to support GONGOs and voices have been raised whether this practice is reasonable. According to the logic raised above, supporting GONGOs is appropriate (especially when no other relevant partners are in sight) as these institutions usually represent elites close to domestic governments and which can serve as dialogue – if not natural – partners in the event of a crisis. GONGOs are also often more liberal in outlook than their governments.⁸

In the search for partners, a broader definition of civil society should be adopted to include not only activist NGOs and individuals, but also businesses, and grassroots political parties. The EU is very reluctant to provide support to (or at least engage with) political parties as this kind of activity is perceived as too “politicized”⁹ – this is also due to the fact that supporting any political parties in a given country is perceived by its government as outright interventionism. However, capacity-building and trust-building between EU actors and these parties can serve as a solid basis for future dialogue.

In Ukraine, for example, businesses have shown to be serving a dual role – providing for the needy and taking on the role that NGOs would normally play. The prosperity and social responsibility of businesses is one of the key factors that help consolidate changes from authoritarianism to democracy and therefore the sector should not be omitted by democracy assistance initiatives. Likewise, NGOs supported by Western donors are playing a pivotal part in helping the Ukrainian parliament formulate key reforms (most notably the so-called Reanimation Package of Reforms platform¹⁰).

Finally, transitions from authoritarianism to democracy in general have been proven to be very volatile periods for the concerned societies, during which the threat of war statistically increases.¹¹ Therefore, democracy assistance and engagement with local trusted partners can help the given societies traverse this vulnerable initial phase and preserve stability.

⁸ For example, Professor Yu Keping, a celebrated Chinese scholar studying democracy, and well-known in the “West” for his book of essays *Democracy is a Good Thing: Essays on Politics, Society, and Culture in Contemporary China* (Brooking Institution Press: 2011) has served as deputy chief of the Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, a major think-tank associated with China’s Communist Party.

⁹ Carothers, Thomas, “Democracy Assistance: Political vs. Developmental?” *Journal of Democracy* 20 (1), 2009, 5-19.

¹⁰ The Major donors of the Reanimation platform include the European Commission, USAID and also the Embassy of Germany and the Czech Republic.

¹¹ Mansfield, Edward D., and Jack Snyder, “Democratization and the Danger of War”, *International Security* 20 (1), 1995, 5-38.

What is the Strategic Role of the IVF

Past plans for increased V4 coordination in the field of democracy assistance in terms of specialization, burden-sharing and the instrumental division of labor to make these activities more effective have not materialized. Yet, the International Visegrad Fund (IVF) can de facto be considered as part of this process that successfully builds on the V4's "transition narrative".

Employing the so-called principal-agent nexus, used mainly in the business sphere, the IVF represents the "agent" whom the V4 states – the "principals" – have "hired" to perform tasks on their behalf, which they would otherwise have trouble implementing themselves (e.g. due to cost-efficiency, lack of expertise or even lack of legitimacy). This, of course, implicitly means that the principals are providing their agent with a notable level of autonomy to act – in absence of such autonomy, it would make little sense to delegate powers to the agent in the first place. The standard problem arising in any principal-agent relationship is that sometimes the agent is motivated to act in its own best interests rather than those of the principal. However, this behavior is often justifiable – over time, the agent acquires expertise in its field of operation that is greater than of the principal and therefore is in a better position to adopt decisions that will mostly likely attain the goals for which it was "hired".

Taking into account this logic, it can be safely said that the IVF should enjoy a notable level of independence from the four governments by virtue of the expertise it has accumulated since its inception. The IVF should use this independence to the fullest possible extent and support projects that would otherwise be too politically sensitive for the V4 governments – this is even more acute as we see a Visegrad group, whose leaders make rhetorical statements that denounce the merits of liberal democracy.

Experts and analysts often acknowledge that within the EU and the member states in general, there seems to be a "bureaucratic fear" of grand and bold projects – this can be due to such projects' complexity, but also to their political sensitivity (recall the EU's emphasis on the "depoliticization" of democracy assistance). Still grand projects are needed to tackle grand threats and therefore the EU needs institutions capable of implementing and monitoring such grand projects – the IVF can become one of them. One of such "grand threats" is Russian propaganda and misinformation campaigns in Ukraine and the certain EU member states. The one effective and legitimate way to address this threat is to counter Russian misinformation campaigns in Ukraine and in certain EU member states. The one effective and legitimate way to address this threat is to counter Russian misinformation with high-quality and bold journalism. This requires a systematic approach for supporting journalism in Ukraine, but also in the member states – accordingly, such activities should also be in the focus of the IVF.¹²

In terms of the strategic role of democracy assistance outlined above, the apparent role of the IVF is to foster partnership and networks of a wide array of civil society actors, including NGOs, GONGOs, businesses, and political parties (if possible). In order to enhance this cooperation with local actors, the IVF should aim at improving their capabilities and capacities. This means not only knowledge sharing, but also helping local partners build a solid funding base. It is a an oft-repeated problem that CSOs in Eastern Europe (and less developed democracies in general) have constant problems with acquiring funds to support their operational costs. In this sense, the IVF should consider providing operating grants to its most trusted partners. Also, through workshops and other

¹² Democracy Assistance Support for Ukrainian media is being provided, for example, by the Media Development Fund of the US Embassy in Kyiv, through projects of the National Endowment for Democracy and the German *stiftungen*. The IVF has also successfully funded projects to support Ukrainian media in the past.

activities, the IVF should help partners diversify their funding portfolio and introduce them to new and flexible forms of fundraising, such as crowdsourcing.

Conclusion

The bottom line of this paper is that democracy assistance is essentially a long term strategic investment into future partnership. These partnerships can potentially preclude instability and help the domestic society pass the transitional period of increased vulnerability to internal and external conflicts. This strategic argument is necessary in a period when certain V4 leaders are questioning the benefits of value-based or normative foreign policies. Rather than arguing for democracy assistance on the grounds of norms and values, it is necessary to realize and develop the strategic effects it can have for the V4 and the EU. Being able to reach out in times of crisis to natural partners, who share a similar worldview, is an indispensable asset for “Western” democracies and one that presents a win-win situation for both sides.

It is without a doubt that democracy assistance providers will face increasing backlash by governments in recipient countries – who are now being massively inspired¹³ by Russia’s “undesirable organizations law” from May 2015, which sets the legal ground for harassing civil society organizations receiving funding from third states – but this all the more makes the case for acquiring natural partners in authoritarian states, in case the given regime collapses and the society finds itself in disorder.

¹³ For example, Kyrgyzstan passed a law in June 2015 requiring NGOs receiving foreign funding to register as “foreign agents”

List of workshop participants

Part I

1. *Marianne Abrahamsen*, Associate Professor in Educational Science and the Institute of Cultural Science, University of Southern Denmark, Denmark
2. *Leila Alieva*, Political Analyst, Azerbaijan
3. *Natalia Churikova*, Journalist, Ukrainian Service, RFE/RL, Czech Republic/Ukraine
4. *Jiří Čištecký*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Czech Republic
5. *Neelam Deo*, Director, Gateway House, India
6. *Mátyás Eörsi*, Senior Advisor, Community of Democracies, Hungary
7. *Katalin Ertsey*, Journalist, Former Member of the National Assembly, Hungary
8. *Pavel Fisher*, Director General for security and multilateral issues of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Czech Republic
9. *Altay Goyushov*, Member of Board, REAL – Azerbaijani Opposition Movement, Azerbaijan
10. *Carl Hahn*, Chairman Emeritus, Volkswagen Group, Germany
11. *Barbara Haig*, Deputy President for Policy & Strategy, National Endowment for Democracy, USA
12. *Beata Jaczewska*, Executive Director, International Visegrad Fund, Poland
13. *Iva Kopečná*, Royal Norwegian Embassy in Prague, Czech Republic
14. *Alexandra Krasteva*, Transparency International Bulgaria, Czech Republic/Bulgaria
15. *Jiří Mach*, Student Czech Republic
16. *Rodger Potocki*, Senior Director Europe, National Endowment for Democracy, USA
17. *Wojciech Przybylski*, Editor-in-Chief, Respublica Nowa, Poland
18. *Karel Schwarzenberg*, Member of Parliament, Czech Republic
19. *Alexander Sibirský*, Student, Czech Republic
20. *Jan Stehlík*, Student, Czech Republic
21. *Vladislav Strnad*, Student, Czech Republic
22. *Michael Škvrňák*, Student, Czech Republic
23. *Christopher Walker*, Executive Director, International Forum for Democratic Studies, National Endowment for Democracy, USA

Part II

1. *Veronika Bajgarová*, Former Director, Department of Human Rights and Transition Policy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Czech Republic
2. *Péter Balázs*, Politician and Director, Center for European Enlargement Studies, Hungary
3. *Vít Dostál*, Director, Research Center, Association for International Affairs, Czech Republic
4. *Konstantin von Eggert*, Journalist and Political Commentator, Russia
5. *Mátyás Eörsi*, Senior Advisor, Community of Democracies, Hungary
6. *Katalin Ertsey*, Journalist, Former Member of the National Assembly, Hungary
7. *Roland Freudenstein*, Deputy Director, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, Belgium
8. *Yevhen Hlibovytsky*, Founder, Pro.mova, Ukraine
9. *Beata Jaczewska*, Executive Director, International Visegrad Fund, Poland
10. *Jiří Mach*, Student, Czech Republic
11. *Petr Pirunčík*, Analyst, Office of the President, Czech Republic

12. *Rodger Potocki*, Senior Director Europe, National Endowment for Democracy, USA
13. *Wojciech Przybylski*, Editor-in-Chief, Respublica Nowa, Poland
14. *Alexander Sibirský*, Student, Czech Republic
15. *Jan Stehlík*, Student, Czech Republic
16. *Vladislav Strnad*, Student, Czech Republic
17. *Jiří Sýkora*, Strategic Relations Coordinator, International Visegrad Fund, Czech Republic
18. *Michael Škvrňák*, Student, Czech Republic
19. *Zsuzsanna Végh*, Research Assistant, Center for EU Enlargement Studies, Central European University, Hungary
20. *Vladka Votavová*, Executive Director, Association for International Affairs, Czech Republic

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Hungary, www.demnet.hu



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Villa Decius Association
Poland, villa.org.pl



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