

Democratic Transitions and the Role of Visegrad Countries

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Jan Hornát, Eva Lacinová



Summary

This paper summarizes the outcomes of a two-part workshop, which took place during the annual Forum 2000 Conference in October 2013. The paper argues that certain ambitions of political transitions are shifting and that these demands and expectations are entrenched in the cultural and socioeconomic context of the respective countries. Western liberal democracy may not be the principal aim of political transitions taking place in the future and democratic countries providing aid to societies in transition should be sensitive to this fact. This also concerns democratic assistance provided by Visegrad countries (V4). The paper further argues that the International Visegrad Fund provides a platform in which the V4 countries can fully utilize their transitional experience and knowledge to support good governance and democratic initiatives in third countries and in the Visegrad group itself.

Recommendations

- EU should use the potential of the Visegrad Group more extensively in providing democracy assistance and promoting democracy, especially in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries
- V4 could bolster its cooperation with the European Endowment for Democracy, the Nordic Council and similar institutions
- IVF should make further efforts to promote itself in countries within its field of focus
- V4 countries could create an expert dialogue that would engage civil society organizations and ministries of foreign affairs and where democracy experience would be exchanged
- V4 countries should set up special departments (similar to the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Department for Human Rights and Transition Policy) which would enhance mutual dialogue and act as a liaison on transitional expertise among the V4 states
- IVF should continue in providing funds to NGOs in the Visegrad group itself in order to retain the NGOs' capability of efficient and expert operation
- IVF should create an evaluating mechanism to measure the impact of projects it is funding

Framing the transitions

The transition from an authoritarian or totalitarian regime to a democratic political system is a comprehensive process that affects the social, political, economic, religious and ethnic aspects of an entire population. Given the intrinsic complexity of democratic transitions, a broad consensus within a given society about the goals and desired outcomes of the transition is conducive or even vital to a successful transition. Thus, for a society undergoing a transition and for all external actors involved in this process, the key challenge is to identify the indigenous population's concrete demands, goals and expectations of the nascent political system.

When comparing the example of the "Arab Spring" uprisings, the perception of the transitions and the public's expectations differed from those of Central and Eastern European societies involved in transitions at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. For this reason, it is perhaps necessary to take a fresh look at the current context and consider if the general understanding of a "transition" is still the same as it was a generation ago.

The common denominators that can be identified throughout all "Arab Spring" uprisings are (1.) a demand for greater representation than existed in the past; (2.) a call for greater accountability from those in power; (3.) and – as political institutions became increasingly disconnected from the society – a general belief that the voice of the people should be heard.¹ These goals can undeniably be satisfied by a democratic political system. Nevertheless, during the uprisings an explicit demand to adopt the model of Western liberal democracy was seldom heard from the given societies.

Western liberal democracy may have served as a reference point or as a political system providing guidance for states undergoing a transition – but unlike during the revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe – the adoption of Western liberal democracy was not among the main goals driving the Arabian uprisings. As the universal applicability of Western liberal democracy is increasingly being contested,² societies are likely to shape their democratic political systems based on socio-political tenets that are congruent with their political culture.

Following this logic, future transitions may take various forms and courses. The regional environment is a decisive factor in determining how a transition evolves and what will be its outcomes. Various historical, economic, cultural and educational experiences lead to different features of political transitions in different parts of the world. Democratic regimes that emanate from such transitional processes may thus be relatively different from the traditional Western liberal democracy model. Therefore, it is important for external actors (e.g. governmental and non-governmental institutions) involved in such processes to be sensitive to the specific social and cultural context in which the transitions take place.

It is also important to note that during a transition, external supporters pay most attention to the "visible" processes that bear quick results, such as the growth of civil society, freedom of the media and the periodic holding of elections. These processes are indispensable and crucial for societies in transition, but they overshadow the more complex requirements of the establishment of the rule of law, which is the essential foundation of a functioning democratic system.

¹ Other common traits of the uprisings can be identified as economic exclusion, lack of employment opportunities due to demographic and structural factors, political corruption or increasing food prices. See Clemens Breisinger, Olivier Ecker and Perrihan Al-Riffai, *Economics of the Arab awakening: From Revolution to Transformation and Food Security* (Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute, 2011).

² See for example Bhikhu Parekh, "The Cultural Particularity of Liberal Democracy," *Political Studies* 40, Issue Supplement s1 (August 1992), pp. 160-175.

Apart from the rule of law, another critical – and often overlooked – factor for the success of a transition is the regional security environment. Both state and non-state actors can potentially thwart or support democratic progress – a state surrounded by democratic countries will experience more pressure to democratize and will consequently receive more support from these countries than a state surrounded by authoritarian or unstable regimes.³ Therefore, a stable regional security environment is needed for the transition to even take place and to reach a successful outcome.

There are clearly no quick fixes for countries facing transition. It has been claimed that constitutional democracy evolves in three stages, with each stage requiring a different time period to fully consolidate: the drafting and establishment of a new constitution requires six months, the creation of a market economy takes six years, while the establishment of civil society may take up to three generations.⁴

Civil society is often deemed to be a pivotal actor in building and consolidating a nascent democratic regime. Therefore the nearly sixty year period envisaged by Ralf Dahrendorf for the full development of civil society may present a risk for the stability of democratic governance in post-transition countries. In this sense, efficient and well-structured support for civil society can potentially shorten this period of formation and significantly contribute to the consolidation of the nascent democratic regime – this kind of support can potentially be provided by the Visegrad countries.

³ Karen A. Rasler and William R. Thompson, *Puzzles of Democratic Peace: Theory, Geopolitics and the Transformation of World Politics* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), p. 38.

⁴ Ralf Dahrendorf, *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990), pp. 92-93.

The way forward and the role of the Visegrad countries

Since the founding of the International Visegrad Fund (IVF), the countries of the Visegrad Group (V4) can indirectly assist and support democratic transitions and civil society organizations in third countries – most notably in the region of the Western Balkans, Eastern Europe and South Caucasus. The Visegrad countries are among the few EU countries that have first-hand experience with democratic transitions and the necessary practical expertise on how to achieve a successful transition from authoritarianism/totalitarianism to democracy. For this reason, the V4 countries have the required legitimacy to assist and provide expertise in transitional processes.

The International Visegrad Fund can be essential in such endeavors of democracy assistance. Even though the fund is equally financed by the governments of the four Visegrad states, as an autonomous subject it can support projects that would otherwise be too sensitive to be carried out by the V4 governments themselves. Despite the successes of the Visegrad countries in creating and operating the IVF, there is still room for improvement in enhancing cooperation and ensuring greater efficiency to attain the goals for which the fund was envisaged.

Due to the fact that the V4 countries are relatively strong in soft power when considering democracy support, the European Union should use the potential of the Visegrad Group more extensively in providing democracy assistance and promoting democracy, especially in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries. At the same time the V4 could further bolster its cooperation with the European Endowment for Democracy or/and the Nordic Council – that is, institutions whose goals converge with aims of the IVF. This would also help to raise public awareness of the International Visegrad Fund since there is increased need for the fund's publicity, especially in countries such as Ukraine or Azerbaijan. Although the fund is partly designed to support civil society initiatives in non-Visegrad countries, the public awareness of the existence of the IVF and the possibilities it can provide is often very low. Therefore, in order to make full use of its potential, the IVF should make further efforts to promote itself in countries within its field of focus.

The significant lack of dialogue and exchange of ideas on democracy transition expertise among the Visegrad countries has been often labeled as a problem that hinders the necessary capacity-building in the field of transitional support. The lack of communication is present both on the level of civil society organizations and the level of ministries of foreign affairs. The solution to this problem could be the creation of an expert dialogue that would engage civil society organizations (CSOs) and ministries of foreign affairs from all Visegrad countries and where democracy transition experience could be exchanged.

A good partner for Czech non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society groups operating in the realm of democracy assistance is the Department for Human Rights and Transition Policy, which is part of the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The department not only offers political support to these organizations, but also provides expertise. Setting up similar departments in other V4 countries could enhance the mutual dialogue and act among the V4 states as a liaison on transitional expertise, which could hence be transmitted to countries receiving financial aid from the IVF.

To be capable of efficient and expert operation, civil society organizations need a high level of professionalism. In order to be professional, the organizations need stable funding. This is where the IVF is poised to play a key role. Apart from supporting democratic initiatives in EaP countries, the South Caucasus and Western Balkans, the International Visegrad Fund should also contribute to upholding intra-Visegrad democracy. Therefore, it is important that the IVF continues in providing funds to non-

governmental organizations and civil society initiatives operating in the Visegrad countries. The V4 states are still young democracies and the steady building of civil society continues to be an important factor in the democratization process.

When considering the process of IVF grant application, there have been calls to make conditions more flexible. Currently, applying for a Strategic Grant from the IVF requires the participation of partners from all four Visegrad countries.⁵ Civil society organizations often have troubles finding reliable partners in other Visegrad countries and the loosening of this condition would potentially facilitate the work of CSOs in meeting the goals of their grant proposals. Nevertheless, the condition to involve partners from all four countries fosters the necessary cooperation and dialogue between Visegrad CSOs and in addition pushes states with a less developed civil society to “catch-up” to the level of other Visegrad member states.

For the IVF, it would also be instrumental to develop a mechanism that would have the capacity to measure or evaluate the impact of projects it is funding. This is, of course, easier said than done, but the International Visegrad Fund must make sure that it does not sponsor “projects for projects”. In other words, the financial assistance provided to various CSOs and institutions should translate into real impact. By creating an evaluation mechanism, the IVF would ensure that its funds are used for purposeful projects that actually lead to significant results.

To conclude, transitional expertise is the most valuable asset of the Visegrad Group. However, the primary prerequisite for successful transition policies is active advocacy. If this expertise is not turned into advocacy of democratic principles, then Visegrad projects will not be as effective as they potentially can be. Due to the fact that democracy support is recently becoming more difficult and is even considered as a nuisance by certain governments, advocacy should be permanently present on all levels – civil society organizations, the ministries, the entire region and especially the EU.

⁵ The Standard Grant requires the participation of institutions or organizations from at least three V4 countries.

Conclusion

Future democratic transitions will take on various forms and courses. For established liberal democracies, it is necessary to realize that ambitions of transitions are different than they were one or two decades ago and that these ambitions mainly depend on factors such as political culture, regional environment and historical experience. Citizens everywhere primarily strive for a functioning society – democracy may either be the means to achieve such a society or the next step after reaching the goal of a properly functioning state. As noted, however, transitions are comprehensive processes that require a notable amount of time before the society adapts to the new political and socioeconomic circumstances. Ralf Dahrendorf envisioned that the formation of a democratic civil society will consume sixty years – this implies that a transition needs six decades to be successfully completed. The utilization of transitional expertise and effective support of democratic initiatives and civil society by the Visegrad countries through the International Visegrad Fund can potentially shorten this period and significantly contribute to upholding democratic principles and fostering good governance in third countries, but also within Visegrad itself.

About the authors

Jan Hornát is currently a project coordinator at the Forum 2000 Foundation. He is a Ph.D. candidate in International Area Studies at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Charles University in Prague and Associate Research Fellow at the Institute of International Relations Prague (IIR). He holds an advanced M.A. degree (PhDr.) in American Studies from Charles University in Prague.

Eva Lacinová works as a project coordinator for KEYNOTE and the Forum 2000 Foundation. She is responsible for projects prepared in cooperation with the International Visegrad Fund and the National Endowment for Democracy. Eva holds M.A. degrees in Media Studies from the Charles University in Prague and Cultural Anthropology of Near East from the University of West Bohemia, Pilsen.

List of workshop participants

Part I

1. *Alexander Lukashuk*, Director of RFE/RL's Belarus service
2. *Amanda Schnetzer*, Director, Human Freedom, George W. Bush Presidential Center, USA
3. *Antonio Enrique González-Rodiles Fernández*, Political Activist, Cuba
4. *Barbara Haig*, Deputy President for Policy & Strategy, National Endowment for Democracy, USA
5. *Dagoberto Valdés Hernández*, Catholic intellectual and the editor and founder of Vitral and "Convivencia" magazines, Cuba
6. *Danuta Glondys*, Director, Villa Decius Association, Poland
7. *Gareth Evans*, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Chancellor, Australian National University, Australia
8. *Christopher Walker*, Executive Director, International Forum for Democratic Studies, National Endowment for Democracy, USA
9. *Igor Blažević*, Founder, One World Film Festival, Czech Republic/Bosnia and Herzegovina
10. *Ivan Mikloš*, Former Minister of Finance, Slovakia
11. *Jacques Rupnik*, Political Scientist, France
12. *Jakub Klepal*, Executive Director, Forum 2000 Foundation, Czech Republic
13. *Jay Naidoo*, Chairperson, Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition, Politician, Trade Union Activist, South Africa
14. *Jiří Čištěcký*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Czech Republic
15. *Jiří Schneider*, First Deputy Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Czech Republic
16. *Julio Antonio Aleaga Pesant*, Political Activist, Cuba
17. *Karel Schwarzenberg*, Member of Parliament, Czech Republic
18. *Maciej Kuziemski*, Project Coordinator, Lech Wałęsa Institute, Poland
19. *Manuel Silvestre Cuesta Morua*, Opposition leader and national coordinator of the Social democratic party Arco Progresista, Cuba
20. *Martin Bútora*, President, Institute for Public Affairs, Slovakia
21. *Martin Palouš*, President, Václav Havel Library Foundation, USA/Czech Republic
22. *Michael Žantovský*, President, Aspen Institute Prague, Ambassador to the United Kingdom, Czech Republic
23. *Mykola Riabchuk*, Political and Cultural Analyst, Ukraine
24. *Pavel Fisher*, Director General for security and multilateral issues of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Czech Republic
25. *Robert Templer*, Central European University, Hungary
26. *Rostislav Valvoda*, Head of Russian Section, People in Need, Czech Republic
27. *Sabina Dvořáková*, Executive Director, DEMAS, Czech Republic
28. *Sean Cleary*, Founder and Executive Vice-Chair, Future World Foundation, South Africa
29. *Suat Kiniklioglu*, Executive Director, Stratim, Turkey
30. *Surendra Munshi*, Sociologist, Member of the Forum 2000 Program Council, India
31. *Šimon Pánek*, Director, People in Need, Czech Republic
32. *Wojciech Przybylski*, Editor-in-Chief, Respublica Nowa, Poland

Part II

1. *Alexander Lukashuk*, Director of RFE/RL's Belarus service
2. *Barbara Haig*, Deputy President for Policy & Strategy, National Endowment for Democracy, USA
3. *Christopher Walker*, Executive Director, International Forum for Democratic Studies, National Endowment for Democracy, USA
4. *Igor Blažević*, Founder, One World Film Festival, Czech Republic/Bosnia and Herzegovina
5. *Jakub Klepal*, Executive Director, Forum 2000 Foundation, Czech Republic
6. *Jianli Yang*, Dissident, President and Founder, Initiatives for China, USA/China
7. *Jiří Čištecký*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Czech Republic
8. *Jiří Schneider*, First Deputy Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Czech Republic
9. *Karla Wursterová*, Executive Director, International Visegrad Fund, Slovakia
10. *Maciej Kuziemski*, Project Coordinator, Lech Wałęsa Institute, Poland
11. *Marek Dabrowski*, Chairman, Supervisory Council of the Center for Social and Economic Research, Poland
12. *Martin Bútora*, President, Institute for Public Affairs, Slovakia
13. *Martin Palouš*, President, Václav Havel Library Foundation, USA/Czech Republic
14. *Mykola Riabchuk*, Political and Cultural Analyst, Ukraine
15. *Pavel Fisher*, Director General for security and multilateral issues of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Czech Republic
16. *Sabina Dvořáková*, Executive Director, DEMAS, Czech Republic
17. *Sean Cleary*, Founder and Executive Vice-Chair, Future World Foundation, South Africa
18. *Steven Gan*, Editor, Malaysiakini, Malaysia
19. *Šimon Pánek*, Director, People in Need, Czech Republic
20. *Wojciech Przybylski*, Editor-in-Chief, Respublica Nowa, Poland

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Hungary, www.demnet.hu



Stowarzyszenie Willa Decjusza
Villa Decius Association
Poland, villa.org.pl



Inštitút pre verejné otázky
Institute for Public Affairs
Slovakia, www.ivo.sk

