

Challenges to Visegrad's Democracy Assistance: Ukraine and Beyond

Visegrad Platform for Dialogue on Democracy,
Human Rights, and Civil Society | Policy Paper

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Summary

This policy paper summarizes the outcomes of a two-part workshop which took place during the annual Forum 2000 Conference in October 2014. It argues that based on recent developments the Visegrad Group (V4) is increasingly facing internal and external challenges to its democracy promotion initiatives. These challenges come not only from the growing political power of 'illiberal' regimes on the world scene (such as China and Russia) but also from the declining internal coherence of the group itself. The paper identifies one of the main tasks facing the V4 democracies: the tailoring of Václav Havel's legacy (i.e. the emphasis on democratic values and human rights in politics) to contemporary circumstances. This task is especially pressing due to current developments in Ukraine. The V4 states can be a source of practical expertise to Ukraine in dealing with concrete social, economic, and political issues, as the Ukrainian political transition is taking place in a similar context to Visegrad. But in order to provide effective democracy assistance both on the rhetorical and practical level, the V4 must be united and approach developments in Ukraine with an increased level of strategic thinking.

Recommendations

- The V4 governments must formulate their motivations for supporting democracy in third countries clearly
- In their communication with domestic publics, the V4 states should further emphasize that supporting democratic values in third countries leads to material (economic) gains, as well as greater stability over the long term
- The Visegrad Group should not be paralyzed by authoritarian propaganda aimed at the alleged failings and inequalities of liberal democracy and the ostensible benefits of 'illiberal' regimes (i.e., develop more effective ways to assess Russian propaganda critically)
- Visegrad states are credible actors in democracy support only to the extent that they themselves embrace democratic values as resentment against 'liberal' democracy grows; it is equally a task for civil society in the V4 states uphold democratic principles
- The V4 states must continuously foster and uphold respect for democratic values and human rights amongst their citizens
- Involving more stakeholders, such as private companies and private funds, in the Visegrad states' democracy assistance initiatives would broaden these policies' outreach and provide a firmer setting for future activities
- The Visegrad states' combination of cultural similarities with Ukraine and experience of successful democratic transition can contribute to the consolidation and democratization of the Ukraine's nascent political system
- Given the stakes for the V4 countries, the situation in Ukraine requires an increased level of strategic thinking on the part of the V4 – assisting democracy is in itself a strategic goal

Identifying the Challenges to Visegrad's Democracy Assistance

The primary prerequisite for assisting democracy in third countries, common to all Visegrad Group (V4) states, is the shared history of political transition from totalitarian communist rule to liberal democracy with a market economy. Employing this experience makes the V4 a trusted partner in assisting nascent democracies in its neighborhood. However, recent developments have shown that the V4 faces increasing internal and external challenges to its democracy promotion initiatives. In the near future these challenges may hinder the V4's potential for democracy assistance and thereby limit the positive impact for which these activities have been lauded in the past.

The key question challenging the V4's democracy assistance initiatives is whether the Visegrad governments will continue to prioritize the promotion of human rights and democracy through their foreign policies. This question is connected to the increasing emphasis on job creation and GDP growth in domestic politics, in large part due to the financial crisis of 2007-2008 and its aftermath. Political leaders react to their constituencies' demands for increased economic growth by adopting domestic and foreign policies that are driven primarily by material interests.

In effect, value-based interests (such as the promotion of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law) are de-emphasized and perceived as a hindrance to deeper economic engagement with authoritarian regimes such as China, Russia, and Azerbaijan. As a consequence, political elites increasingly present the issues of democracy assistance and relations with third countries through the false dichotomy of *either* achieving economic growth *or* 'preaching' about human rights and democracy.

This challenge is further connected to the growing sentiment within the V4 states that twenty-five years of liberal democratic governance have not delivered the expected economic and social results. Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban has demonstrated this disquieting sentiment in his vocal desire to undo 'liberal' democracy in his country and instate an 'illiberal' form of democracy, after the examples of Russia, China, and Turkey.¹

The Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which has traditionally been considered a key player in supporting democracy and human rights, has recently proposed a revised conception of Czech foreign policy. This new conception would supposedly be more sensitive to the economic interests of the country compared to past policies that emphasized support for democracy and human rights. But due to backlash from the public, which perceived the new policy as intending to overlook human rights abuses and democratic shortcomings for the sake of building stronger economic relations with third countries, the conception is reportedly being reformulated.

¹ Zoltan Simon, "Orban Says He Seeks to End Liberal Democracy in Hungary", Bloomberg, July 28, 2014. Accessed November 11, 2014 via <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-07-28/orban-says-he-seeks-to-end-liberal-democracy-in-hungary.html>.

Nevertheless, President Milos Zeman backs the foreign policy revision, as he is eager to build closer relations with economically strong authoritarian regimes such as Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Russia, and China.²

Such developments call for deeper intra-Visegrad solidarity in upholding key democratic principles – conceivably a task for civil society in Visegrad states. The rhetoric and the positions of certain V4 leaders are in themselves a reason to carry on promoting and assisting the spread of democracy in the world. If it were not for the economic strength of non-democratic states like China and Russia, such rhetoric would find little support.

These questions point also to the external challenges facing the V4's democracy assistance: with a seemingly successful economic model, 'illiberal' regimes such as those in China and Russia seem increasingly attractive to certain parts of the population of democratic states. Combined with the sentiment that liberal democracy does not deliver and nostalgia for the welfare benefits offered during communism, expressions of anti-democratic sentiment within the Visegrad states may become increasingly common, and policies focused on material interests will lack values-based components.

The abovementioned challenges, linked to the growing doubt of certain V4 leaders in the utility of democracy assistance and the questioning of democratic standards as such, disrupt the internal cohesion of the Visegrad Group and render common courses of action in democracy promotion all the more difficult. This in turn may lead to a loss of credibility in the process of democracy assistance. Until now, credibility based on historical experience has been one of the V4's major assets in promoting democracy. As the emphasis on value-based interests fades, third countries may view V4 democracy assistance as a tool for achieving material gains and hidden agendas. Needless to say, Visegrad states are credible actors in democracy support only as long as they themselves embrace democratic values.

In order to uphold the promotion of democracy and human rights in their respective foreign policies, the V4 governments need to clearly formulate their motivations for supporting democracy in third countries. Is democracy assistance just an idealistic obligation grounded in historical experience, or can it also further economic and security interests?

Security is indeed a byproduct of democracy assistance – experts and academics commonly argue that democracies do not go to war with each other.³ Moreover, a consolidated democracy could potentially bring more stability not only to Ukraine itself, but to the region as a whole. Upon the successful stabilization of its democracy, Ukraine could serve as a future promoter of democracy in its own neighborhood, especially in Belarus and Moldova. In communications with domestic publics, the V4 states should further emphasize that supporting democratic values in third countries indirectly lead to economic gains. Democratic regimes are based on the rule of law, and therefore their business environments are more stable and predictable for investors than in non-democratic states. Every past democratic transition has led to a surge in foreign direct investment (FDI) and foreign trade – the

² President Zeman's inclination towards these states was demonstrated for example by his official state visit to China, where he vowed not to preach about human rights and showed interest in the Chinese Communist Party's ability to "stabilize society."

³ This theory is referred to as "democratic peace." For a discussion see Michael E. Brown, Sean M. Lynn-Jones and Steven E. Miller (eds.), *Debating the Democratic Peace* (Cambridge, The MIT Press: 1996).

increase in FDI over the three-year post-transition period in comparison with the three-year pre-transition period is estimated at 45 percent.⁴

Moreover, the Visegrad Group should not be paralyzed by authoritarian propaganda aimed at the supposed failings and inequalities of liberal democracy and the benefits of 'illiberal' regimes. In other words, the V4 states must develop more effective ways to critically assess and address Russian propaganda. Liberal democracies are not flawless political systems, but they have an inherent tendency to self-correct and cope with their problems on the basis of popular participation and transparency. In the midst of this 'war of ideas,' Visegrad states must be confident about the democratic values on which their political systems are based and embrace these values all the more, even though the current discourse in certain V4 states about 'illiberal' democracy, as mentioned above, will likely hinder this process.

Confidence in the perseverance of democratic values is a necessary precondition for a stable democratic system and for providing support to democratic regimes in third countries. This internal confidence derives not only from efficient and effective democratic institutions, but also from the overall sentiments, beliefs, and principles of the general public. In this sense, the important 'homework' for the V4 states is to continuously foster and uphold respect for democratic values and human rights amongst their citizens. A public fully devoted to democratic values and human rights would not permit the gradual slipping of value-based policies from the foreign policy agenda. In other words, the main question becomes how to tailor the legacy of Václav Havel (i.e. the emphasis on democratic values and human rights in politics) to contemporary circumstances. How can the V4 states harmonize material- and value-based interests in foreign affairs?

One of the possible answers to this question is to involve more stakeholders in the democracy assistance and human rights policies of the Visegrad states. The worrying decline of value-based policies shows that in Czech foreign policy, the legacy of Vaclav Havel can be undone merely with 'the snap of a finger.'⁵ However, dismantling civil society is much more complicated, and would take many years to effectuate. For this reason, involving more stakeholders, such as private companies and funds, in the democracy assistance initiatives of the Visegrad states would broaden the outreach of value-based policies and provide a firmer setting for future activity. Alongside 'corporate social responsibility,' a certain 'corporate democratic responsibility' should be encouraged.

In light of the aforementioned, the International Visegrad Fund (IVF) is best situated to maneuver the challenges to Visegrad's efforts in promoting and supporting democratic values in its neighborhood, and to maintain continuity in the group's democracy assistance policies. Despite receiving equal funding from the four partner states, the IVF maintains a significant level of independence from national political developments. Its activities rest on three pillars: project grants, people mobility, and capacity-building in institutions. This scheme has proven flexible, and the IVF is demonstrating its capability to transform its procedures to fit local contexts – a significant asset in addressing ongoing transformations, such as in Ukraine.

⁴ Minxin Pei and Merritt Lyon, "Investing in Democracy," *The National Interest*, February 19, 2003. Accessed January 16, 2015 via <http://nationalinterest.org/article/investing-in-democracy-2257?page=show>.

⁵ Czech News Agency, "Czech Foreign Policy Abandons Havel," *Prague Post*, June 16, 2014. Accessed November 11 via <http://www.praguepost.com/the-big-story/39620-czech-foreign-policy-abandons-havel>.

The Visegrad Group and Ukraine: Mutual Expectations

Ukraine and the Visegrad countries share a number of historical and cultural commonalities. These include the Slavic origin of the Czech, Slovak, Polish, and Ukrainian peoples; the significant Hungarian minority living in Ukrainian territory; life behind the Iron Curtain; Ukrainian and Polish territory unity under the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of 1569–1795; or contemporary Ukraine's Zakarpattia Oblast as a part of Czechoslovakia during the inter-war period. These continuous historical contacts and reciprocal exchanges have brought the cultures of the five states closer together. As a result, mutual comprehension in the social and political spheres is potentially strong, in spite of some tensions arising from historical developments.

The sense of cultural proximity creates a unique space for cooperation between Ukraine and the Visegrad states that Western European states cannot provide. Indeed, former Ukrainian governments have considered the V4 states to be valuable and credible partners for the future (and explicitly mentioned this in their strategic foreign policy documents). Moreover, the current political establishment is seeking the assistance of the Visegrad states during the implementation of the Association Agreement with the EU.

The combination of the Visegrad states' cultural similarities with Ukraine and their experience of successful democratic transitions could provide a system of 'shortcuts' for the consolidation and proper democratization of Ukraine's nascent political system. As the political transition is taking place in a similar cultural setting, V4 states can provide Ukraine with practical expertise and solutions to concrete social, economic and political issues that have been effective in the Visegrad context. The geopolitical situation of contemporary Ukraine is different and more severe than that of the Visegrad states after 1989, but this must not serve as an excuse not to provide the current political establishment with assistance and consultations.

Equally important to practical assistance is V4 support for Kyiv on the international scene. Visegrad governments are in a position to play the role of 'interpreters' for developments in Ukraine. Kyiv can communicate its message to the V4 states, which will then transmit the message to Brussels, and vice-versa. Furthermore, given the IVF's 'on the ground' activities in Ukraine, its efficient system of trustees, and the increasing number of Ukrainian students studying in the universities of the Visegrad states through the fund's and other bilateral mobility programs, the V4 can provide and voice the necessary feedback from Ukrainian civil society and the political establishment. The V4 could thus not only provide financial assistance to Ukraine through the IVF, but could potentially foster a broader dialogue between the Ukrainian population and the EU.

As already mentioned, the Visegrad states should clearly explain and communicate to their constituencies the motivations and interests for supporting a stable, democratic Ukraine. Political elites' clear support for the idea that a successful Ukraine is pivotal for security, trade, and democracy in Central and Eastern Europe would be conducive to uniting the public over the cause, and consequently allow for more coherent policies.

However, when speaking of what Visegrad or the EU can do for Ukraine, it is also necessary to ask what Ukraine can bring to the table. Current perceptions of Ukraine within the EU are not always helpful in this debate. Ukraine is seen as a bastion of politically active and corrupt oligarchs, whose self-interests trump the country's well-being. Moreover, Ukrainians living and working in the EU are mostly considered menial laborers. It has also been noted that during the ongoing crisis, Ukrainian embassies in Visegrad states have sometimes been passive in their communication and cooperation with local governments.

Nevertheless, Ukraine can provide EU with a better understanding of Russia and a more nuanced interpretation of its actions. This is due in part to the relative cultural proximity between Russia and Ukraine, and to the developed network of contacts between Kyiv and Moscow, much broader than the network connecting Brussels and Moscow.

Arguably, one of the most important tasks for Ukrainian foreign policy – after the consolidation of the government's position in the entire country – is the formulation of an Eastern policy. The present government's lack of a coherent strategy for dealing with its Eastern neighbor hinders strategic thinking in Kyiv, and consequently in the EU. Sooner or later, it will become instrumental for Kiev to draft such a policy, which could allow some form of synchronization between the Eastern policy of the EU and that of Ukraine. In an ideal scenario Ukraine's Eastern policy could become complementary to EU Eastern policy – an important contribution to the European Union table.

A saying in academic circles claims that there is no Russian imperialism without Ukraine, and at the same time that Europe will never be whole and free without a successful Ukraine. These two perceptions of the geopolitical role of Ukraine are in essence mutually exclusive, and they make the current crisis in the country very difficult to manage. In an ideal situation, the international community should resolve conflicts such as that in Ukraine through mutual consensus and to the benefit of the global order. However, if the international community permits Russia to divide Ukraine and appropriate its territory as it has already done with Crimea, it will be necessary to admit that no global order exists.

Conclusion

The key challenge facing the Visegrad states in assisting democracy in third countries is the disparity between rhetoric and practice. In their discourse, certain political leaders in the V4 countries are downgrading the need to spread democratic and humanist values, and instead emphasize material interests. These rhetorical shifts often combine with an ambiguous stance on the current Ukrainian crisis and, even subtle support for Russian actions. This kind of ambiguity and support is invaluable to Russia, as it allows Moscow to claim that the Visegrad states, which used to be a part of the Soviet empire, are now coming full circle and arguing for the Russian cause. Russia is already using all possible means to act against a unified stance of the EU on the Ukrainian issue, including propaganda that indirectly influences EU citizens.

The entire situation requires an increased level of strategic thinking about the Ukrainian elephant in the room on the part of the V4, although it may seem that even EU leaders are reluctant or incapable of thinking in truly strategic terms on the issue. Therefore, despite any internal discord over the value of liberal democratic principles and human rights in foreign policy, the Visegrad Group, and especially the IVF, must pursue democracy assistance policies, which are strategic initiatives with a clear goal: the democratic consolidation of Ukraine.

About the author

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3. *Martin Ehl, Chief International Editor at Hospodářské noviny, Czech Republic*
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5. *Petr Fleischmann, Advisor, Foreign Affairs Committee, Senate, Czech Republic*
6. *Carl Gershman, President, National Endowment for Democracy, USA*
7. *Bakhtiyar Hajiyeu, Youth Activist, Azerbaijan*
8. *Yevhen Hlibovytsky, Founder, Pro-Mova, Ukraine*
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14. *Lucia Najšlová, Editor in Chief of V4 Revue; the Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic*
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