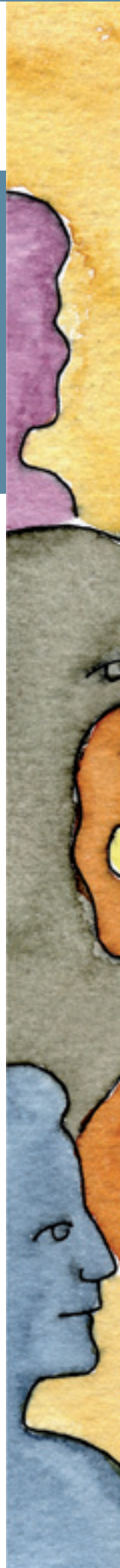




Twenty Years of Western Democracy Assistance in Central and Eastern Europe

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Abstract

The end of the Cold War, heralded by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, ushered in an optimistic era of democratic change for members of the former Soviet bloc and expansion for the European Union. Pro-democratic political parties and civic organizations emerged in the newly liberated countries, reported on by a newly free media. Democracy-building efforts in the region have received massive assistance particularly from Western Europe and the United States. The post-1989 era can be divided into three periods: a short period of initial euphoria, a decade of pronounced optimism, and a decade of increasing complications and heightened security concerns, culminating in the financial and economic crisis that began in 2008. Like in 1989, the West faces new and unpredictable circumstances and must develop new democracy assistance strategies. Before the European Union and its allies can effectively promote democracy in other countries, they need to address the internal problems brought on by the global economic crisis, from which they have not yet fully recovered. Democracy assistance needs to be tailored to the specific needs and expectations of each country and handled with tact and with respect for local democracy activists. Donor countries also need to be aware of ways that pursuing their own economic or security goals can tarnish their democratic credibility. Despite all these challenges, recent history has provided ample evidence that the human spirit and solidarity can overcome even the direst obstacles and may be our strongest resource in the quest for democracy and cooperation in Europe and beyond.

1. Introduction

At the end of 2009, Europe celebrated the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, which opened up space for unprecedented changes in former Soviet bloc countries, of which ten have already joined the European Union (EU). As we have now entered a complicated period marked by global economic turbulence, security concerns, and expectations connected with changes in European institutions and US policies, there is a natural desire to look back and analyze this state of affairs and think about new strategies in this changing context. Western democracy

assistance, which contributed to the remarkable socio-political transformation of many former Soviet bloc countries and the enlargement of NATO and the EU, is among the issues that today call for serious rethinking on both sides of the Atlantic.

This paper is intended to encourage discussion about the future of Western democracy assistance in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond. It looks at the past two decades of European and American efforts to facilitate democratization in the former communist bloc countries, dividing events into three chronological periods and taking note of developments and their implications for Western democracy assistance. It concludes by presenting some general lessons learned from this experience. It is in essence the personal account of a practitioner from the region who believes that Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) can be looked at as a fascinating social laboratory in which numerous strategies and methods of Western democracy assistance were designed and implemented.

2. Democratic Breakthroughs

In the ‘annus mirabilis’ of 1989, the unthinkable happened: the communist system collapsed in the vast territory of CEE, and the Soviet Union’s domination ended. The Iron Curtain, which had artificially divided the European continent for nearly half a century, was dismantled, and the process of democratic reforms in the countries of the former Soviet bloc started. These historical breakthroughs created hope and opened space for the enlargement of the European democratic family.

The historical breakthroughs of 1989 created hope and opened space for the enlargement of the European democratic family.

‘Returning to Europe’ was one of the key slogans of oppressed populations in these countries. More than a geographical concept, it was a profound human call for building

democratic systems based on the political, economic and civic freedoms characteristic of Western European nations. The joy of mostly peacefully liberated East Europeans was reciprocated by the democratic West, which opened the doors of its institutions and offered multiple assistance programs. ‘Building Europe whole and free’ became an unprecedented mega-project attractive both for the populations and leaders of the democratic West and for those in post-communist Europe.

This period was characterized by huge enthusiasm and a belief that totalitarian practices were gone and that the European enlargement process would proceed quickly. Former dissidents and opponents of the communist regime occupied key positions in state institutions and called for a civilized transition and a new political culture based on justice, competence and fairness. Broad-based civic movements and newly born political parties replaced Communist parties, which found themselves in a state of chaos.

The first free elections were held in this early period. These were fully covered by the emerging free media, which became an open source of information and place for debate.

Encouraged by Western partners, a spontaneous and massive proliferation of civic associations and foundations of all types occurred throughout Eastern Europe.

Citizens started to use their new rights and freedoms, such as freedom of speech, association, assembly and expression of religious faith. Encouraged by Western partners, a spontaneous and massive proliferation of civic associations and foundations of all types occurred throughout the region. The free market started to replace the rigid and ineffective centrally controlled economic model.

Although many of these transitional trends occurred across the whole of CEE, one cannot overlook significant country or sub-regional differences relating to economic and social standards, history (including past experience with democratic systems) and the course of post-1989 transformation. It became obvious that in some countries political and economic transition, paralleled by integration into Western international structures, would be smoother than in other countries, which were less developed or were undergoing new problems or even armed conflicts, such as those that followed the dissolution of the multinational federations of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union.

In spite of unforeseen complications in some areas of CEE, the process of unification of an old continent thus started. New instruments and policies were designed for bringing in new states from the East. Agreements between the European Union and new applicants from the East – Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia – were signed as early as December 1991.

Democracy Assistance in the Breakthrough Period

Once the Iron Curtain was dismantled and CEE countries opened up to pluralistic democracy, multiple public and private players from the West started assisting them. Since there were no previous experiences with any similar situation in international relations, new methods and tools had to be conceived to support the post-communist countries in the radical transformation of their political, economic and social systems. The example of well-functioning and freely cooperating democratic states ensuring the well-being and security of their citizens acted as a strong motivation in many such situations.

Western governments, political parties, educational and research institutions, churches, the media, grant-making foundations, nongovernmental and voluntary organizations as well as individuals from all walks of life were excited by the bloodless democratic revolutions and the human spirit they revealed, and they started exploring ways of helping this transformation. Numerous initiatives, programs and organizations emerged both in CEE and in the West to provide generous financial and material aid, technical assistance and expertise. Spontaneity, improvisation and enthusiasm characterized Western assistance in these momentous months. The guiding principle and overarching goal was to help transform institutions and develop democratic practices in post-communist countries following the model of those that functioned well in Western Europe and the United States (USA). The expectation was that this compatibility would eventually allow them to join Euro-Atlantic alliances and structures.

3. First Decade (1990–2000)

The first decade of the post–Cold War period was an era of deep belief in the European project shared by confident and prosperous Western Europeans and Americans who provided a model and pole of attraction for post-communist nations undergoing transformation. The Euro-Atlantic family shared a common vision of ‘an ever larger union’ based on the values of democracy, social justice and economic prosperity. The coordination of policies directed towards Eastern Europeans was broadly based, and in general the programmes that ensued resonated well with enthusiastic publics.

During this period the political and technical grounds for EU enlargement were laid, and the actual process started and accelerated. The ten most advanced CEE countries – the Visegrad Four (Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia), together with the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), two Balkan countries (Bulgaria and Romania), and ex-Yugoslav Slovenia, together known as the CEE 10 – negotiated and signed Association Agreements with the EU between 1991 and 1996. Hardly anybody was prepared to question the transformative power of the EU in this period. The ambition to join or closely cooperate with the EU and NATO became the main driving force for profound reforms and modernization throughout the region. Policy-makers in the EU and the USA were proud of their policies and achievements in redesigning Europe.

The ten most advanced CEE countries – Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Romania and Slovenia, also known as the CEE 10 – negotiated and signed Association Agreements with the EU between 1991 and 1996.

Building variations of the Western democratic model of the state and joining successful political, economic and security institutions created by European and American partners served as the ultimate goal for these liberated CEE countries. Although the transition to democracy and the free market became much more complicated than originally expected,

the policy of conditionality¹ and open doors, associated with foreign assistance, helped these countries to navigate the transformation and integration processes.

Democracy assistance realized through newborn political and non-state actors was viewed as a fully legitimate part of the overall assistance package helping transitional societies to achieve the necessary level of change to enter Western international organisations. When internal democratic deficits in any given country emerged, both the EU and USA used conditionality, diplomatic pressure or direct assistance mechanisms to overcome them. One example is Slovakia, the only country in the CEE 10 with which the EU temporarily interrupted accession talks due to democratic deficits, which were created by Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar's policies. In that case, broad-based democracy assistance mechanisms (realized mostly through support to civil society groups) were put in place, which resulted in electoral 'regime change' driven by domestic forces, thus bringing that country back onto the democratic path. After that, Slovakia accelerated reforms and joined the first group of EU candidate countries. This kind of experience helped EU and US public and private institutions to improve their strategies and instruments in coping with the neo-authoritarian regimes that started to emerge in some Balkan and post-Soviet countries.

Apart from the CEE-10 frontrunners, for which accession to European and transatlantic structures became achievable goals and which quickly benefited from numerous instruments of Western assistance, there were two distinct groups of post-communist countries in which the post-1989 transition became associated with serious hardship – the Western Balkans and the post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The quality of life deteriorated significantly in these sub-regions of the former communist world, and ethnically motivated civil wars broke out in some countries, pushing them clearly out of the integration mainstream. Boris Yeltsin's Russia became politically and economically weak and consumed with its own affairs. In the Western Balkans and the CIS, Western actors were involved in complicated assistance tasks aimed at overcoming the political, social and economic legacies of a more deeply rooted

¹ Clearly stated EU accession criteria, fulfilment of EU membership criteria.

communist past in the CIS and at rescue operations and humanitarian assistance in the war-torn Balkans.

NATO's recent history illustrates well the dichotomy in CEE at the end of the first decade of transition. In April 1999 at the Washington NATO Summit, the leader of the 1989 Velvet Revolution, Czech President Václav Havel, said that bringing the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary into the Alliance marked the end of the division of Europe. But in the same year, NATO used military force to relieve Kosovo's humanitarian catastrophe, created by the autocratic Yugoslav President Slobodan Milošević.

This seemingly omnipotent autocrat was finally defeated peacefully by the brave actions of civil society and the democratic opposition in Serbia. The end of the Yugoslav wars and Serbia's 'electoral revolution' in fall 2000 (after similar breakthroughs in Slovakia in 1998 and Croatia in 1999) proved that people's desire to build open democratic societies and join the European family was greater than the power of skilled nationalist leaders. It also proved that political will and commitment and well-designed Western assistance can contribute to changes even in very complicated situations.

Democracy Assistance in the 1990s

The 1990s were a golden decade of democracy building and Western democracy assistance in CEE. On the ruins of the centrally controlled state systems of former Warsaw Pact and Comecon countries, people started to build societies in which political and civic liberties would prevail over the monopoly of one political belief and a single untouchable political group. The space created by democratic breakthroughs, which abolished the power of Communist parties, was quickly filled with new political and civic groups which, helped by a free media, pressed for profound political, legal and economic changes.

The West, which had formerly helped in a limited way – for example, by spreading information via 'subversive' media like Radio Free Europe and by supporting dissidents and underground activities – was now openly promoting the fundamental broad-based transformation of institutions (such as governmental agencies, parliaments, the media, and educational, cultural, scientific and religious institutions as well as private enterprises) and the building of new institutions (such as nongovernmental organizations, private electronic and print media and business entities). Western expertise and experience helped to prepare new legal systems, including new constitutions, which facilitated the decentralization of power and the development of a new political culture. Even if people felt that the transition to a new system was accompanied by economic and political hardships, they believed these were temporary. The vision of a rule-based and prosperous Western European society now seemed to be an achievable goal for many CEE countries.

These transformational processes were encouraged by multiple American (US and, to a lesser degree, Canadian) and European public and private groups, which allocated significant resources and developed new mechanisms of aid. US assistance in democracy building was provided by private foundations (such as the Open Society Institute, the Mott Foundation, the National Endowment for Democracy, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the German Marshall Fund of the United States, the Ford Foundation and the Eurasia Foundation) and other organizations (such as Freedom House, the National

Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, the Institute for East-West Studies, Education for Democracy, the Foundation for a Civil Society, the Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe and the US Committee on NATO) as well as government-funded programs (realized through USAID and US embassies). This aid was quick and flexible and focused on newly born civic initiatives and NGOs, political groups and the media.

European aid focused more on transforming state institutions and emerging businesses and later also on developing democracy and civil society. Their programmes were achieved mostly through government channels (such as the Dutch Matra program, the Swedish SIDA, the United Kingdom's Department for International Development and Norwegian Peoples Aid) or EU-funded programs (such as Poland and Hungary: Assistance for Restructuring their Economies (PHARE) and Technical Aid to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS)) as well as several independent agencies (for example, the Westminster Foundation, the German political party foundations, national Helsinki Committee chapters, Transparency International and the European Foundation Centre). Several Japanese governmental and private programs (for example, the Nippon Foundation and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation) complemented the activities of their American and European partners.

With this assistance, CEE countries were able to introduce new institutions and processes. Political pluralism, civic participation, a free electoral process, the monitoring of power holders, transparency, accountability, good governance, the rule of law, public-private partnerships – these and other terms became welcome additions to the vocabulary and practice of transforming societies. Among assistance agencies there was a widespread belief in the power of civil society, free elections, the free media and the free market to overcome the complicated legacies of the past. Success with reforms and the gradual fulfilment of conditionality criteria set by European and transatlantic structures in the more advanced states, as well as the abolition of neo-authoritarian regimes in Slovakia (1998), Croatia (1999) and Serbia (2000) by means of electoral breakthroughs assisted by Western donors, contributed to this feeling.

Among assistance agencies there was a widespread belief in the power of civil society, free elections, the free media and the free market to overcome the complicated legacies of the past.

American and European policy and donor communities acted mostly in harmony in this period; and their assistance efforts were not challenged by any serious political, ideological or technical difficulties.

4. Second Decade (2000–2009)

Although the transformation of the CEE region progressed significantly at the turn of the century, and many countries were moving towards full integration to EU and NATO, this second decade brought numerous unforeseen political, security and economic complications not only in CEE but also in the broader international arena. The clarity and self-confidence of proponents of liberal democracy and the free market became weaker because of these changes. Moreover, hesitation about and even opposition to the further enlargement of the EU and NATO has started to emerge in the last few years, in connection with the ambitions and actions of a newly confident Russia, which has confronted a weakened USA and a hesitant EU.

The enlargement of the EU and NATO and unexpected democratic breakthroughs in the post-Soviet space (Georgia and Ukraine) were among the most positive moments for democracy promotion in CEE. An emotional flag-raising ceremony took place in Brussels in spring 2004 admitting to the EU eight post-communist countries – the Visegrad four (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia), the Baltic three (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) and Slovenia; Bulgaria and Romania joined them two years later. NATO admitted all of these countries (except the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary, which had joined earlier) in 2004.

It has been widely accepted that bringing ten former communist countries into the EU and NATO represented a historical triumph of democracy assistance, on which Europeans and Americans agreed and were able to cooperate closely. A similar assessment, with high expectations of spreading democratic values further to the East, accompanied the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003 and a year later the Orange Revolution in Ukraine.

However, various events and trends significantly complicated the course of development in enlarging Europe in this second decade. These include change in the USA after September 11, 2001 as well as changes in Russia, the EU and the CEE region itself, as well as the global economic crisis.

Post-9/11 Change in the United States

The initial shock from the radical Islamicist attacks in September 2001 became transformed into a series of domestic and international steps, such as the ‘war on terror’, launched by the USA, and the introduction of the ‘freedom agenda’. US foreign policy changed dramatically. Both the content and style of President George W. Bush’s policy led to misunderstandings and tensions even with America’s closest allies in Europe. The most problematic case has been the military campaign in Iraq, which in a short time contributed to a decrease in the Bush administration’s popularity at home and to a distinct worsening of the US image abroad. US credibility in the field of democracy promotion deteriorated. Mismanagement of the Iraq conflict, problems with counterterrorism policy and linking democratization abroad as an essential condition of US security were among key elements of this unexpected trend. The abuses of detainees at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay weakened the moral legitimacy of American efforts to encourage democratic progress in other countries.

Moreover, the economic crises that hit the USA at the end of the Bush presidency made the former superpower vulnerable and less attractive to follow, and the country even started to be blamed for the global crisis. The presidency of the charismatic Barack Obama created new hopes in the USA, Europe and other parts of the world. It remains to be seen how his administration will be able to cope with the huge domestic and global challenges it faces.

Evolution in Russia

While George W. Bush’s America became fully occupied with the complicated post-9/11 situation, Vladimir Putin’s Russia started to overcome its own deep political and economic crisis and to emerge once more as a significant regional and global player. Putin’s government, while limiting domestic political and civic rights and blocking

Russia, rich in energy resources, rediscovered its power and the ambition to use it in the international arena.

'subversive' foreign assistance, brought a new drive and self-esteem to Russia. This state, rich in energy resources, rediscovered its power and the ambition to use it in the international arena. This has had serious consequences for European and transatlantic affairs, and it has affected Western democracy assistance efforts as well as the further enlargement of the EU and NATO.

Particularly sensitive disagreements arose over territories in the neighbourhood shared by the EU and Russia (Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan).

Broad-based assistance of the transatlantic community in these former Soviet republics, and their own ambitions to develop closer ties with the West, were viewed as contrary to Russia's strategic interests. Especially after the colour revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine and Kosovo's declaration of independence, more serious tensions between Russia and the Euro-American alliance evolved. They resulted in multiple disagreements between Russia and the EU and NATO as well as between Russia and its neighbours. Periodic oil and gas disputes, and even the use of military force in Georgia in August 2008, enriched Russia's foreign policy arsenal at the same time as the country entered its own era of serious economic hardship.

Challenges to the European Union

Already during the 'big bang' EU enlargement in 2004, voices were raising questions such as: How far we should go? Where are the borders of Europe? What will the new members bring to the EU family? Shortly thereafter, the term 'enlargement fatigue' entered the political vocabulary in the EU. It became obvious that if the EU wanted to be effectively governed (while remaining open to further growth) and to strengthen its capacity to compete in a changing global arena, serious reforms had to be adopted. The painful debate among member states over the future nature of the European project was underway.

The negotiations on modifying EU institutions had begun in 2001, first of all resulting in the European Constitution Treaty, which failed due to rejection in referendums in the Netherlands and France. Another attempt to streamline the workings of the EU, the Treaty of Lisbon (also known as the Reform Treaty), was signed on 13 December 2007 with the stated aim of enhancing the efficiency and democratic legitimacy of the Union. In late 2009, anxiety about the results of a complicated eight-year process to bring about badly needed constitutional reforms of the EU finally ended. Irish voters' endorsement of the reform in a repeat referendum in October, and the subsequent signature of Lisbon Treaty by the Euro-sceptic Czech president, Václav Klaus, in November, completed the marathon ratification process. The Lisbon Treaty came into effect on December 1 and is expected to transform Europe into a more unified and influential global player with the capacity to make Europeans more secure and prosperous.

Developments in the CEE Region and Relations with the EU

The diversification of the CEE region grew during this period. The ten countries that joined the EU and NATO started to adapt to new political, economic and social realities. The mobility of people, goods and services became a welcome reality for the CEE 10. However, once the pre-accession conditionality regime of the EU was over,

populist and nationalist tendencies emerged in some new member states, adding to the voices questioning the EU's character and its further growth.

Although the EU and USA have started to pay more attention to two groups of underprivileged transitional countries – the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia) and the new EU's Eastern Neighbourhood countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) – these countries face far less favourable conditions for joining Western institutions than did the CEE 10. Decreased enthusiasm for further enlarging the EU, a weakened USA, forceful anti-enlargement moves by Russia and the world economic crisis on the one hand, and political and economic difficulties among countries in these two sub-regions on the other hand (including unresolved constitutional issues and tense relations between neighbours), do not constitute a promising setting.

The Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia) and the new EU's Eastern Neighbourhood countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) face far less favourable conditions for joining Western institutions than did the CEE 10.

It is estimated that since the early 1990s the international community has invested over 200 billion dollars trying to bring peace, stability and economic development to South-Eastern Europe. Stabilization and Association Agreements (similar in principle to the Europe Agreements signed with the CEE 10 countries in the 1990s), which have been signed since 2000 with all Western Balkan countries (except Kosovo), explicitly provide for future EU membership. However, Croatia is the only country that is likely to join the EU in the near future. For the others, it will be a longer and more complicated process because of weak democratic institutions and economies and serious problems with organized crime and ethno-religious divisions. In spite of unprecedented financial, technical and military help, the future of Bosnia-Herzegovina and of the newly independent Kosovo (which is still not recognized by all EU member states) appears bleak.

The EU's eastern neighbours face many challenges in their own painful domestic transitions, as well as pressure from Russia, with which the EU upholds special relations (the Strategic Partnership). Although their eventual membership cannot be ruled out, it is an even more distant possibility than for the Balkan countries. For these six East European countries (which have been part of the European Neighbourhood Policy, introduced in 2004), the EU initiated a new project called the Eastern Partnership in 2008. It aims to provide an institutionalized forum for discussing visa agreements, free trade deals and strategic partnership agreements, while avoiding the controversial topic of accession to the EU. (For the time being, Belarus will only participate at a technical level, due to the EU's opposition to President Alexander Lukashenko's authoritarian policies).

Implications of the Global Economic and Financial Crisis

The economic and financial sectors of the USA and the EU grew after the end of the Cold War, and the transatlantic economy was competitive and healthy. This allowed the USA and EU to plan big projects, including international assistance programs, and to bring weaker transforming post-communist economies closer to their international institutions. Since 2000, newly powerful economic competitors like China, India, Brazil and Russia appeared on the international scene, and this had an impact on international relations and on debates about social models and democracy.

The most serious and negative impact on the global economy started to unfold after the turbulence on the American financial market in the second half of 2008. Serious weakening of the economic superpower distorted the intertwined economies of Europe and of CEE in particular. Economic slowdown, the growth of unemployment and the energy crisis have been among the top news stories in this period. Discussions about the basics of the free market and state regulatory frameworks have become more frequent in the media and policy communities. The January 2009 Russia-Ukraine gas dispute had serious consequences to the life and economy of Europe and showed very clearly the high degree of interdependence on the continent and the absolute necessity, apart from rescue operations, to rethink national and international policies and relations.

Democracy Assistance since 2000

In the first years after 2000, the democracy assistance community was still confident and able to claim successes. The “export” of democracy from the Central European and Baltic states, where it had proven successful, to the Balkans and Eastern Europe, where it faced more complex challenges, was built into strategies of Western democracy assistance agencies. Support for pro-democratic and pro-European civic groups, NGOs and politicians and for the free media, and the focus on ensuring free and fair elections (which it was believed would eliminate nondemocratic and nationalistic elements) initially worked even in some of these very complicated, mostly new states.

However, conditions for democracy promotion in CEE changed dramatically in the second half of the decade. The Western Balkan countries started soon after 2000 to overcome the painful consequences of their civil wars and to catch up after their ‘lost decade’. In this new mood, they greeted the possibility of working their way into European integration. They opened up towards incorporating democratic norms into their policies and, for the most part, welcomed foreign democracy assistance as part of the fulfilment of the membership conditionality package. They started to learn practical lessons from their more fortunate transitional neighbours, who also developed new democracy aid programs within their developmental assistance programs. Several new private and public mechanisms, including projects like the Balkan Trust for Democracy, the European Fund for the Balkans and the Regional Cooperation Council, were established in the Balkans and run by people from the region, to facilitate European and Euro-Atlantic integration. Aid to projects supporting civic participation, respect for human and minority rights, good governance and intra-regional and European cooperation significantly accelerated modernization and Europeanization in the Western Balkans.

The consequences of a painful past and malignant nationalist habits have not fully disappeared from public life, and one cannot rule out further divides and transitional complications. But the overwhelming desire in the region is to live in peace and develop a normal, European life free of all sorts of barriers, and this became the prevailing long-term strategic objective supported by both the EU and the USA. New members of the EU and NATO have become visible advocates of democracy promotion and further enlargement in recent years. New developmental assistance policies in these countries, realized mostly via public-private partnerships, often target issues of human rights and democracy promotion.

The transitional situation and potential for integration look quite different for the mostly impoverished and poorly known post-Soviet countries that are struggling to improve their ineffective and corrupt political systems. These countries, located between the two geopolitical realities of the EU and Russia, have received far less attention and aid than other CEE countries. However, the power of example (such as the electoral defeat of neo-authoritarian regimes in Slovakia, Croatia and Serbia), along with practical help from other, more advanced transitional countries and Western assistance, led to remarkable revolutionary changes in two countries: Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004.

Struggling post-Soviet countries, located between the two geopolitical realities of the EU and Russia, have received far less attention and aid than other CEE countries.

After these peaceful electoral regime changes, many people started to believe that liberal democracy could continue spreading to other post-Soviet countries where powerful politico-economic groups had developed various quasi-democratic systems. The Rose and Orange Revolutions not only inspired pro-democratic elements in the post-Soviet space but also rang alarm bells for authoritarian leaders. They started to look more closely at the agents of change and to examine the processes that had led to these unexpected political breakthroughs in order to take preventive measures in their own countries – such as tighter control of NGOs, the media, the political opposition and foreign organizations. In this period of CEE transition, the term ‘backlash against democracy’ appeared in the democracy assistance vocabulary.

In particular, Russia, with its power-centralizing tendency and emergence as a strong and successful actor with global ambitions, did not tolerate EU and US democratization programs on its own territory or in the ‘near abroad’ countries with pro-Western inclinations. The activities of foreign agencies with a human rights, democracy and good governance portfolio were labelled as unacceptable interference in the domestic affairs of Russia and were limited or terminated. Particularly the US democracy and freedom agenda, coupled with security interests (such as support for NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine and the decision to build antimissile facilities in the Czech Republic and Poland), provoked a strong response from Russia and competition between these global players. Russia began to use political, economic and even military tools to protect its national and international interests, with far-reaching consequences for the CEE region and beyond.

Serious questions arose about the viability of the liberal democratic model in post-Soviet countries and their chance for joining Western treaty organizations, especially when the leaders of the Rose and Orange Revolutions quickly started to lose their democratic credentials and were unable to achieve positive socio-economic and foreign policy results. On the other hand, the truly autocratic, oppressive and isolated Belarus under Lukashenko showed relative economic stability until recently. Multiple unsuccessful attempts to democratize ‘Europe’s last dictatorship’ led to the EU’s recent controversial experiment with temporarily lifting the travel ban for Belarus elites and entering into privatization deals.

Nowadays, therefore, concerns about economic and financial stability, energy, security and social stability and the struggle over spheres of influence overshadow the debate on human rights and democracy in CEE and the whole of Europe.

5. Conclusion: Challenges Facing Democracy Assistance

It is obvious that Western democracy assistance in CEE and beyond is likely to be seriously challenged in the years to come. Today, the European project and the vision of Euro-Atlantic prosperity are associated with more questions than answers.

Studies and conferences on democracy assistance in the last two years have tended to focus on weaknesses rather than pointing to strategies that could achieve results. Much like it did 20 years ago, Europe is again facing an unfamiliar situation. New strategies will have to be developed to make democracy assistance effective.

The key challenge will be recovering from the global crisis and strengthening the capacity of the USA and EU to fix their growing economic and political problems. Until the transatlantic community overcomes its own crisis, it can hardly focus on developing successful new strategies for promoting democracy. The USA, newly energized under President Barack Obama, the new European administration, and all EU member states will be tested soon if we are going, in spite of our unexpected difficulties, to remain available and continue to share our values and resources with those who need them in our neighbourhood and other parts of the world.

Until the transatlantic community overcomes its own crisis, it can hardly focus on developing successful new strategies for promoting democracy.

Several lessons learned from Western democracy assistance in the CEE region may be relevant while we consider the challenges ahead. They can be summed up by the concepts of symmetry, style, sincerity and spirituality.

Symmetry

There should be symmetry in understanding and will between foreign aid providers and a recipient country. Democracy assistance works best when it responds to the needs of local reformers and when both elites and the general public in the recipient country are open and aware of the reasons why their country is receiving assistance. Modernization, the well-being of citizens and a clear potential for meeting the membership criteria of international organizations like the Council of Europe or the EU, all help people to understand and play this game. In CEE countries for which membership is a far distant prospect or not a feasible option at all, Western democracy assistance attempts are often viewed as abstract and negative and to various degrees inhibited. A special effort needs to be made to develop arguments, policies and suitable methods in countries where the power of conditionality is missing. Many democratization approaches that succeeded for the CEE 10 (such as support for civil society and free elections) cannot be automatically applied in the same way to other countries.

For example, if the government of a country like Belarus (the only European country which was, due to huge democratic deficit, excluded from the Council of Europe) refuses foreign governmental or nongovernmental democracy promotion programs, there are limited ways to assist it. Support may have to take the form, like before 1989, of behind-the-scenes help to dissidents and human rights activists rather than modern, broad-based Euro-Atlantic democracy assistance. Similarly, energy-exporting Azerbaijan, whose authoritarian government provides reasonable security and economic growth, has been resistant to Western democracy assistance.

Style

Democracy assistance touches on sensitive issues like politics, power and political psychology; it is a delicate international skill requiring tact. Overlooking national specificities and public sentiments, or using excessive criticism and pressure, can jeopardize success. CEE consists of many new, not-so-well-known states that appeared on the map only after the fall of communism and are simultaneously trying to build new systems and new states. Nation building, associated with basic survival, is often given higher priority than democracy building, which sometimes allows skilful populists to exploit subtle but powerful national feelings.

To support pro-democratic forces (political or civic) in transitional countries, it is important to keep in mind that they are the primary agents of change and they, not donor agencies or their governments, are best suited to developing strategies of change. They are often risking their future, in some cases even their lives, in the struggle for dignity and justice in their home countries. In some countries, the democratic system is introduced faster, in others it may take a long time. Impatient and authoritative donor representatives, policy-makers or 'democracy officers' can sometimes cause serious problems and erode people's belief in the genuine nature of democracy assistance. Several American and European institutions that were created to promote democracy and freedom, and that did so quite well in CEE in the last two decades, are likely to have serious legitimacy and operational problems in the coming years – especially those that do not take into consideration the fundamental changes in the international arena and the legitimacy and image problems of Western democracy assistance (including their own), and are not ready to change their approach.

Sincerity

The ten CEE countries that are already anchored in the West achieved that goal relatively quickly. Their starting conditions, geographic proximity to the EU and shared history along with the overall international environment helped them to achieve this historic success. It was not so difficult to convince policy-makers and populations of the CEE 10 of the sincere desire of the EU and USA to bring them into a community of shared values. The world we are living in today is, however, more colourful. The values and interests of the EU and USA are not always so easy to decode, while the remaining countries of CEE (the Western Balkans, the Eastern Neighbourhood and Russia) are less known in the transatlantic family and more complicated to assist. Moreover, since these eastern and south-eastern European countries are very diverse, with a much lower pattern of cooperation compared with their neighbours that are now EU member states, a country-specific, long-term approach to democracy assistance is needed above all.

Due to security issues, energy resources and other strategically important interests connected with these countries, democracy assistance programs are faced with various moral dilemmas and must embrace more compromises than before. On one hand, we are giving support to pro-democratic forces and the independent

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media and to efforts to modernize administration, protect human rights and promote good governance. On the other hand, people in these countries, including democracy activists, see how well-paid Western experts or media owners help autocratic politicians to improve their image and win elections, how Eastern oligarchs cleanse their names by funding Western NGOs or bringing well-known but controversial personalities to their own NGO boards, and how some Western policy-makers close their eyes to political abuses in energy-rich authoritarian states. The transatlantic community will need to rethink how to deal with the lower democratic standards of the electoral process in many of these countries in relation to the role and influence of international monitors.

Spirituality

Democracy building is a broad-based and complicated human endeavour, difficult to depict properly by using analytical language. Luckily, there are many witnesses, Easterners and Westerners, who have been privileged in the last two decades to see true miracles and experience how the unstoppable human spirit searching for truth, equality and justice can overcome fear, apathy and mistrust. It is due to this spiritual component that people of some CEE nations have already built their comfortable Euro-compatible political homes, while others are struggling to overcome past or present difficulties. The complexity and increasing anxieties of our multi-polar world make it necessary to cooperate more broadly and yet again to go beyond merely technical and material solutions.

About the Author

Dr Pavol Demeš has been the Director for Central and Eastern Europe of the German Marshall Fund of the United States, based in Bratislava, Slovakia, since January 2000. Previously he served as the Executive Director of the Slovak Academic Information Agency – Service Centre for the Third Sector (a leading NGO in the country), foreign policy advisor to the President of the Slovak Republic, and Slovak Minister of International Relations. He has served on the boards of national and international associations and foundations and published extensively on civil society, democracy and international relations.