



3. The need to overcome this lack of motivation for public involvement and to strengthen the culture of active citizenship in all Visegrad countries is one of the prerequisites for increasing citizens' support for democratic assistance to other countries. **Political and civil society leaders should play a stronger role in promoting the culture of active citizenship not only on the domestic, but also on the international scene.**

4. The Visegrad countries' experience of the "Return to Europe" over the past two decades has been an integral part of the recent wave of democratic transition, and all stakeholders in society have a part to play in ensuring that the experience and know-how of the democratic transition and European integration are harnessed and spread.

To achieve this, **closer co-operation is needed between the different actors in the field of democracy assistance at the domestic and international level: public administration, NGOs, academia, intellectuals, independent media, national governments, EU institutions, international organisations, etc.**

5. Visegrad NGOs working on democracy assistance at the international level lack leverage and networking capacity in Brussels. Without successful lobbying, their success in securing support for major EU projects will be significantly constrained. **Co-ordination and joint lobbying by Visegrad NGOs, and greater engagement in EU-wide NGO networks, would strengthen their chances of support for projects and broaden their international experience and contacts in the field.**

6. An important element of international development co-operation, including support for democracy, is donor co-ordination, which should serve to facilitate an optimal distribution of resources and to prevent unnecessary duplication of actions, as well as supporting mutual efforts, especially those of smaller donors. Experts from the Visegrad Four countries contend that there is scarcely any co-ordination at all.

Co-operation within the Visegrad Group is limited to numerous consultation meetings, but real co-operation takes place only on a few individual projects. Furthermore, there is no co-ordination at all with other EU member states, while the period of co-operation on individual projects with the US, so advanced in the past, and to a lesser extent with Canada, has come to end. There is no systemic co-operation.

The Visegrad Four countries need to take seriously their commitments made upon EU accession to increase the share of gross national income devoted to official development assistance, and to forge alliances with other EU member states and other major development aid donors on democracy assistance projects in less developed countries – to strengthen their own know-how and synergies with other donors.

## **Two decades after the fall of communism, Central Europeans' opinions differ on the democratic transition**

*A majority of Czechs, Slovaks and Poles consider democracy-building to have been a success; a majority of Hungarians regard it as a failure*

The attitudes of the population of the Visegrad Four countries – the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary - toward the changes since the fall of communism in 1989 are not uniform. While 63% of Czechs, 62% of Poles and 59% of Slovaks consider the building of democracy in their countries to have been a success, only 28% of Hungarians share this view, and for 66% regard it as a failure.

Similarly, a majority of Czechs (68%), Poles (59%) and Slovaks (53%) believe that there are more advantages to life under democratic rule than there were under the dictatorial regime before 1989, but only 28% of Hungarians

**From the perspective of 20 years, the building of democracy in our country was:**

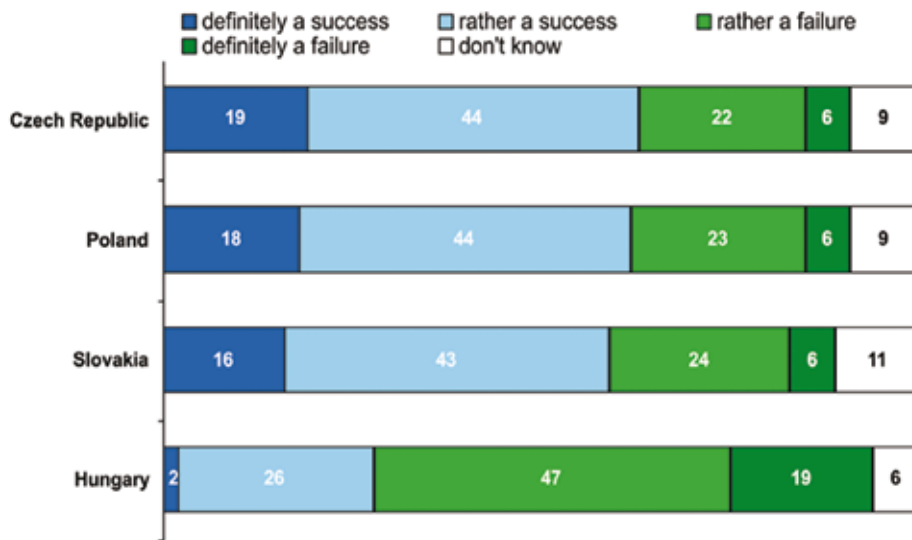
are of the same opinion. On the other hand, only 18% of Czechs, 24% of Slovaks and 25% of Poles attribute more disadvantages to the current system than to the pre-1989 regime, while as many as 50% of Hungarians believe that there are more disadvantages to the current system than to the regime that fell two decades ago.<sup>1</sup>

Although the extent of satisfaction with the changes during the transition period in individual countries is different, the reasons underlying these feelings are similar. First and foremost, as the focus-group discussion with young people with university education revealed in Hungary, the dissatisfied participants "referred almost exclusively to the economic gains and losses, and they also identified the winners and losers of transition from this standpoint".

The following quote illustrates this reasoning: *"Although we cannot remember the pre-1989 period well, I am convinced that during the communist regime there was a certain living standard achievable for every citizen, whereas nowadays we face economic and unemployment risks, and uncertainty in life."*

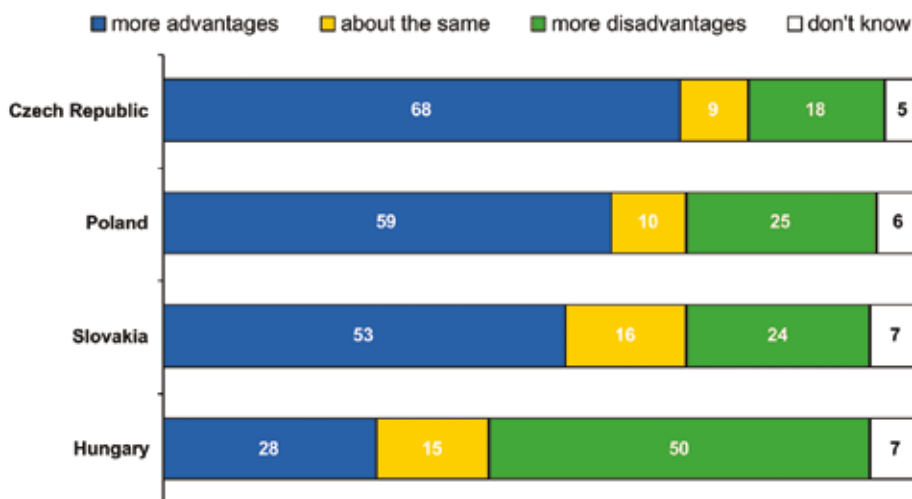
People are critical of the increasing differences in opportunities. As one of the young respondents put it: *"Compared with life before the change of regime, nowadays there are many more opportunities available, but the majority of citizens are unable to take advantage of them."*

<sup>1</sup> The analysis is based on representative surveys conducted in each of the V4 countries in October 2009 and four focus group discussions with young people with university education in Bratislava, Budapest, Prague and Warsaw. In each Visegrad country, 1,000 respondents over the age of 18 were surveyed. In parallel, focus groups of young people who were in elementary school in 1989 (27-28 years old today) were conducted in all four countries.



Source: PASOS, October 2009

**In comparison with the pre-1989 period, the current period has:**



Source: PASOS, October 2009

Obviously, this criticism has been aggravated by the economic crisis that has increased the unemployment rate, as well as the level of economic uncertainty in all Visegrad Four countries.

Similar reasons were given by the Polish focus-group participants who complained about the widening socio-economic gaps and about the reduced role of the state in providing welfare and care for individuals.

An additional Institute for Public Affairs (IVO)/ FOCUS survey carried out in Slovakia in October 2009 made possible a study of the dimensions of satisfaction or dissatisfaction by means of quantitative findings. It showed that a majority of people believe that their job opportunities are less favourable in comparison with the opportunities available to their counterparts before 1989. This perception is stronger among inhabitants of regions where the unemployment rate is higher. These feelings are more widespread in central and eastern Slovakia, while the inhabitants of western parts of the country do not feel so deprived of job opportunities.

## Turning back the clock: were the economic and political changes in 1989 necessary?

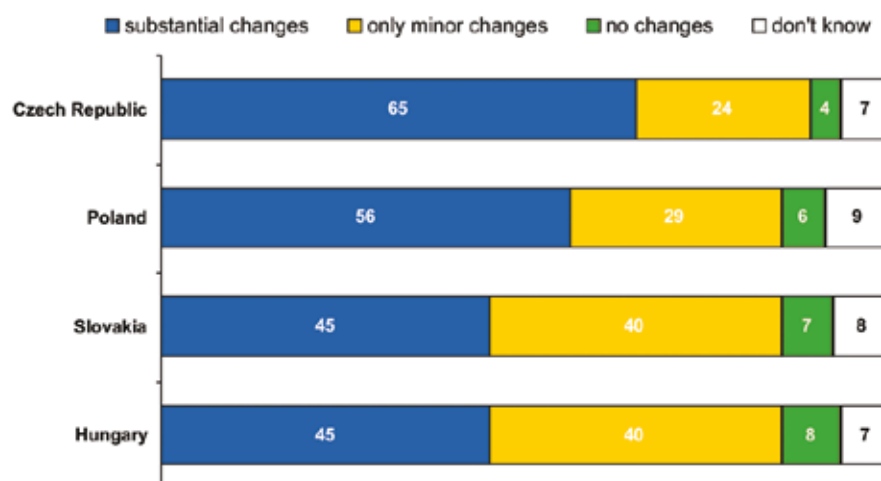
How do the citizens of the Visegrad Four countries assess the need for political and economic changes to the communist system that was in place in 1989? In all four countries, only a minority believes that no changes were needed and that the pre-1989 regime could have continued without reforms. However, views diverge concerning the scope of the necessary changes.

Czechs are the most convinced about the necessity of substantial political and economic changes (65% and 59% respectively), followed by the Poles (56% and 55% respectively). In both countries, the group of respondents who think that minor political and economic changes would

have been sufficient is much smaller. While Czechs are more convinced about the need for political than economic changes, Poles do not make a distinction.

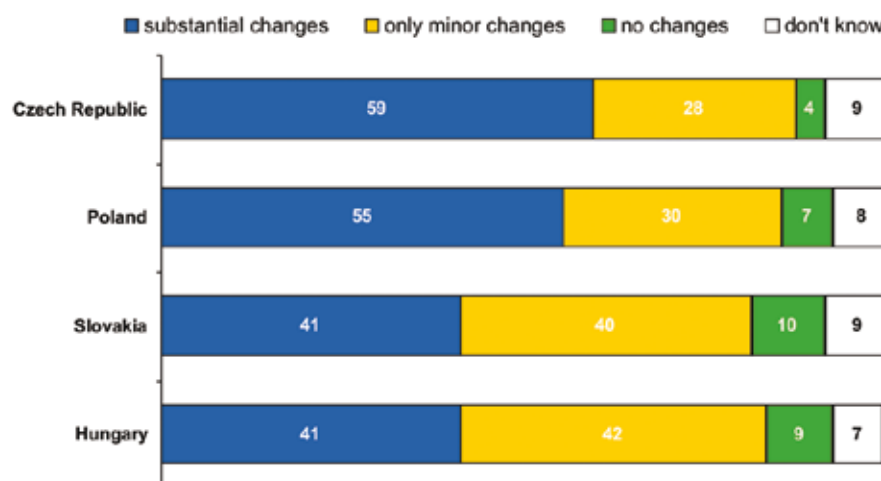
The perception of citizens in Slovakia and Hungary is different. The conviction about the need for substantial political and economic changes is less widespread: only 45% of respondents in Slovakia and Hungary believe that there was a need for political changes, while 40% think that minor changes would have been sufficient. These responses suggest that a large number of people are ignoring the basic political features of the communist regime – political discrimination and marginalisation of the various “class enemies of socialism”, schizophrenic life and humiliating political

### Did the pre-1989 political system in our country require changes?



Source: PASOS, October 2009

### Did the pre-1989 economic system in our country require changes?



Source: PASOS, October 2009

pretence, censorship, the lack of religious freedoms, the absence of freedom of movement, etc.

As for the economic changes, only 41% of Slovaks and Hungarians believe that substantial economic changes were needed, while the percentage of those who believe that only minor economic changes were needed is approximately the same (40% of Slovaks and 42% of Hungarians). **Economic “realists” have still not prevailed over the “delusionists” in Slovakia and Hungary.**

## **The young and educated value today’s freedoms; the elderly and rural populations are less appreciative of the transition to democracy**

In all four countries, there is a similar internal differentiation of attitudes. The belief that there was a need for substantial economic changes is less widespread among the middle-aged and older generation; among people with lower education; and among inhabitants of rural areas. The analysis in Hungary revealed that the vast majority of respondents coming from the relatively poorer counties thought that the pre-1989 political and economic system needed only minor or no changes, which poses a sharp contrast to the opinions of the respondents coming from other parts of the country.

This opinion-gap reflects disparities between on the one hand prosperous regions with better infrastructure and foreign investment and on the other hand marginalised regions providing much fewer opportunities for their inhabitants – where the economic disparities have widened since 1989.

Some of these arguments apply also to Slovakia. People living in underdeveloped regions of Slovakia remember with nostalgia the period of gradual socialist modernisation with its social homogenisation and

egalitarianism, full employment, urbanisation, housing construction, increases in educational attainment and living standards, etc. A majority of Slovakia’s inhabitants did not realise that the socialist economic system had hit the limits of its growth and was operating at the expense of future generations. They rather inclined toward its improvement by means of some variant of “perestroika”.

From this perspective, Slovaks were less critical of communism than the inhabitants of the more advanced Czech Republic where the modernisation of industry had started earlier. Another important factor was that there was a stronger and more influential dissident movement in the Czech part of the common state than in Slovakia – and it was this movement that shed critical light on the viability of the regime and managed to better prepare the population for the changes.

An understanding of the past, namely the regime of János Kádár from 1956-1988, is important to gain an understanding of attitudes in Hungary today, according to Gergő Medve-Bálint, the Hungarian analyst for the “Return to Europe” study.

“To appease the population and to avoid the outbreak of another revolution, the Kádár regime was convinced that it had to offer a relatively good standard of living that would be accessible to every citizen, provided that people stayed away from politics. The communist regime could provide this only by compromising on foreign debt: the relatively high standards of living in Hungary compared with other Central and Eastern European Countries had been externally financed and the government accumulated huge foreign debts, which eventually was a major contributor to the collapse of the regime.

However, during those decades, Hungarians may have internalised the idea of generous, seemingly “cost-free” social services, and a materialistic outlook. This was reinforced by the popular expectations about the change of regime, which were expressed in rather materialistic terms... These expectations remained unfulfilled.”

### A SAMPLE OF THE OPINIONS EXPRESSED BY PARTICIPANTS (27- AND 28-YEAR-OLDS) IN FOCUS-GROUP DISCUSSIONS

A participant from Hungary: *"The problem is that the skilled workforce has lost economic opportunities. Without speaking two or three languages and having higher education degrees (and without a good social network to utilise), you might not achieve much."*

Another voice from Hungary: *"Those who graduated in economics around 1991-1992 are the top managers of today, and they make an awful lot of money. They are definitely the winners of transition."*

A participant from the Czech Republic: *"The change was good for those who did not have the chance of self-realisation under communism. But those who were used to all kinds of certainties – secure job, social security – are complaining and saying that they were better off under communism."*

A participant from Slovakia: *"I would not make a distinction between the young and old people. I would rather say that educated people - and those who used the first years after 1989 to start a private business - are doing well."*

Another voice from Slovakia: *"The generation of our parents belongs to the losers because they were used to a certain system and, all of a sudden, everything changed and something different arrived: too many new things and opportunities, and they had to choose which would be appropriate for them. Our generation has gained due to the changes."*

A participant from Poland: *"At that time, people were more united, more willing to make friends with others. Neighbours were closer together, exactly because they had that sense of alliance against the authorities. For instance, when people were talking while waiting in a queue, they felt safe, they felt a sense of solidarity in that uncomfortable situation and in the knowledge that the state was their enemy. Now we can hear that it does not exist any more, there is no sense of togetherness, everyone acts for themselves, for their own good."*

Another voice from Poland: *"We can now enjoy freedoms, guaranteed by the constitution. We can now exercise those rights, whereas we could not do that in the past. For instance, we could not travel freely or freely express our views."*

## Winners and losers – and a weak grasp of history

The attitudes of Central Europeans toward the changes after 1989 are significantly influenced by their education, age, and economic status: the higher their education, the better their evaluation of the path that the country has gone since the fall of communism.

In all four countries, participation in the labour market – or the chance of participation – plays an important role. Employed people and

students identify significantly more positively with the post-1989 changes than the retired and unemployed. A deeper insight into the views of people with different professions shows remarkable differences between the more positive attitudes expressed by managers, white-collar professionals, entrepreneurs and office workers on the one hand and blue-collar workers, especially unqualified ones, on the other hand.

A similar, albeit somewhat less pronounced, variable is the influence of the age: younger people, particularly those belonging to the 25-

34 age group (in the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia), have a more positive attitude toward the changes, in contrast to older people, especially the oldest generation (except Poland, where the 45-54 age group is the most critical of the changes).

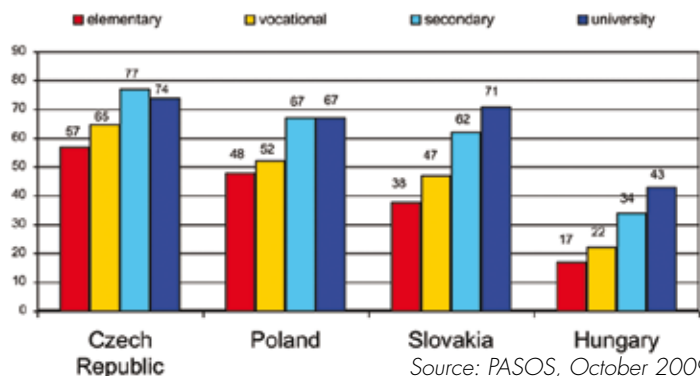
On the other hand however, the youngest generation (18-24) is the least informed about the character of the pre-1989 regime. According to the findings of the IVO/FOCUS poll in Slovakia, around two-fifths of this age group have no idea about the communist coup d'état in 1948, about the 1950s, or about the period of normalisation after the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact armies. This lack of understanding of history is a damning indictment of the education system and media in Slovakia today.

These findings are in accordance with the public opinion survey concerning the winners and losers of the post-1989 changes. According to the IVO/FOCUS poll in Slovakia, entrepreneurs, professionals, and young people belong to those social groups that have gained the most after 1989, while farmers, blue-collar workers and the elderly are seen as the losers of transition.

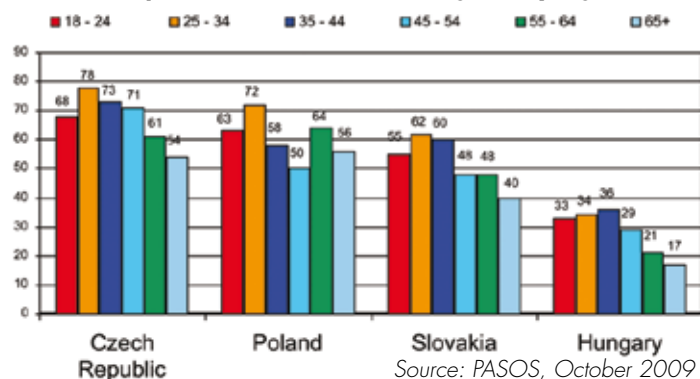
### Clientelism tarnishes democracy today: active citizenship is not inspired by modern politics

It would be too simplistic to explain the criticism of the regime in terms of material disillusionment alone. As the IVO/FOCUS survey in Slovakia revealed, there have also been political disappointments. On the one hand, when asked to compare their current situation with that facing similar people before 1989, as many as 78% of Slovaks praised the increased freedom to work, study or travel abroad, 70% appreciated better access to information, 63% saw more freedom of expression, and 62% found more chances to participate freely in public life.

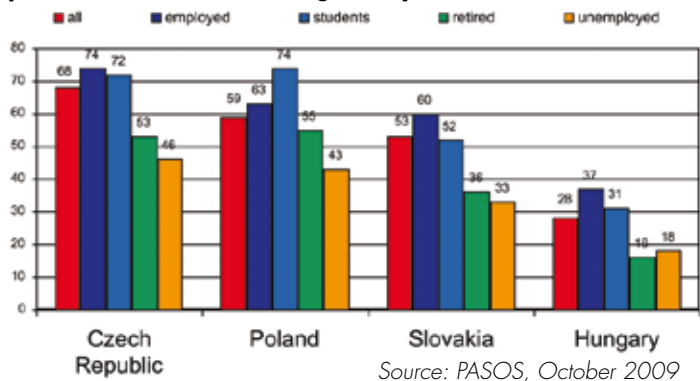
### "In comparison with the pre-1989 period, the current period has more advantages" (by education)



### "In comparison with the pre-1989 period, the current period has more advantages" (by age)



### "In comparison with the pre-1989 period, the current period has more advantages" (by economic status)



However, other aspects did not give such grounds for enthusiasm. Only 31% of respondents thought that they had a better chance to be successful through honest work. Moreover, only 26% were convinced that the equality of citizens before the law has improved in comparison with the era before 1989.

Despite the appreciation of individual political freedoms, only 39% of people in Slovakia believed that they had a stronger influence on political decision-making now than before 1989.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, citizens' perceptions of politics and politicians are very critical, even disdaining.

As Medve-Bálint warns, people in Hungary – and this applies also to other Visegrad countries – “are irritated by the numerous cases of corruption that have been exposed in the media and by political clientelism, which creates an atmosphere that certain privileged groups are more equal than others and that justice rarely catches up with their illegal deeds. The impression that the political elites are lacking any real sense of responsibility also implies that they lose credibility.”

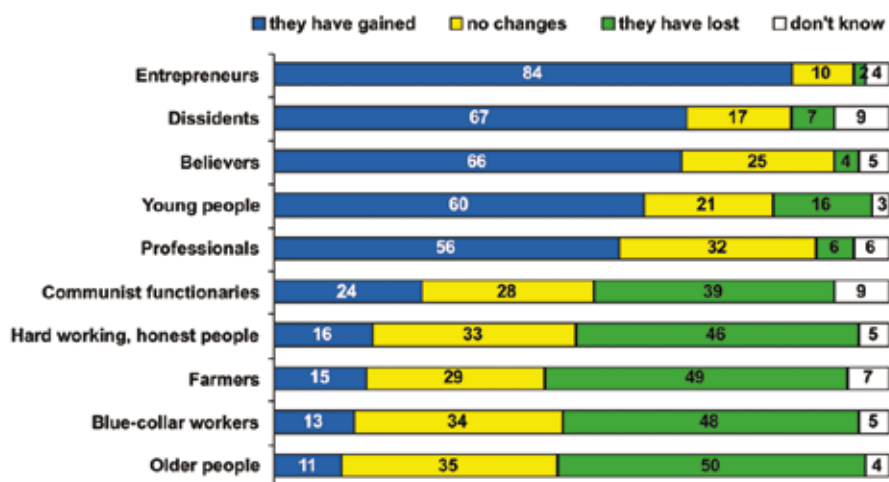
Unfortunately, this criticism does not boost the motivation of citizens to participate in politics; on the contrary, it often increases their indifference, lack of interest, and feelings of political alienation.

This was clearly visible from the focus-group discussion in Slovakia, in which all participants unanimously praised the individual freedoms and chance to make private choices, but they did not connect them with their personal responsibility for public affairs, and with their own participation in solving issues of public interest.

The need to overcome this lack of motivation for public involvement and to strengthen the culture

<sup>2</sup> Similar views were expressed also by Czech respondents surveyed by the Public Opinion Research Centre (Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění) of the Institute of Sociology of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, 3 November 2009). [http://www.cvvm.cas.cz/index.php?dis\\_p=zpravy&lang=0&r=1&s=&offset=&shw=100963](http://www.cvvm.cas.cz/index.php?dis_p=zpravy&lang=0&r=1&s=&offset=&shw=100963)

### “Who has gained and who has lost since 1989?” (opinions of Slovakia's citizens)



Source: Institute for Public Affairs (IVO)/FOCUS, October 2009

of active citizenship seems to be one of the most important challenges for the next period of developing democratic political culture in all Visegrad countries.

Needless to say, this is also one of the prerequisites for increasing the citizens' support of democratic assistance in other countries. Political leaders should play a stronger role in promoting the culture of active citizenship not only on the domestic, but also on the international scene.

## Building on transition experience: new EU member states now wear the donor's hat

One of the objectives of the “Return to Europe” project was to identify and analyse public support for democracy assistance. This phenomenon has been explored in two areas. Firstly, what do the public think about the process of establishing and building democracy in their respective countries? Was democracy established and built mostly with the help of other countries or mostly through domestic efforts? The second

area of focus was an examination of the level of public support for democracy assistance to other countries where democracy is lacking or falling short.

## “With a little help from my friends?”

The populations of the Visegrad Four countries differ in their views as to how “their” democracy was established and built. The majority of Poles (62%) and Czechs (52%) think that they achieved democracy principally through their own efforts. In Slovakia, this opinion is shared by 40% of respondents and in Hungary by only 35%, while 42% of Slovaks and 46% Hungarians believe that they built democracy mostly “with the help of other countries”.

This perception is influenced by several factors. The countries with strong anti-communist opposition – Solidarity in Poland and Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia (this legacy is more present in the Czech Republic than in Slovakia) incline more to perceive themselves as the lead actors of their own democratisation. Slovakia represents a specific case – for the population, the democratic assistance was most visible not during the collapse of the communist regime or in the early years of democratisation, but in the mid- and late 1990s when the country suffered under the autocratic-style rule of Vladimír Mečiar.

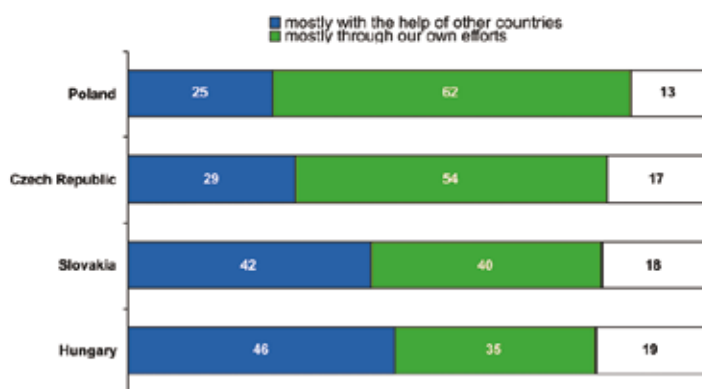
During that period, pressure from the US and the EU served as a strong political tool in curbing the democracy deficit. In the case of Slovakia, it is possible to talk about a “second” electoral revolution with the defeat of Mečiar in 1998. In more general terms, Slovakia stands out as a case where EU conditionality (the Copenhagen criteria) was particularly effective in spurring the process of EU integration. Slovakia is often presented as the success story of EU conditionality policy.

The IVO/FOCUS polling in Slovakia included the question, “Could you evaluate the importance of the help with establishing and building democracy that our country received from the following countries?” The citizens see the assistance of the EU as the most important (69% of respondents declared it as important and crucial), followed by the Visegrad countries (48%) and the US (31%).

In Hungary, more people incline to the statement that democracy was established mostly through assistance from other countries. Hungarians hold the most skeptical views about the current regime, and the feeling of “ownership” appears to be weaker, particularly in comparison with Poland and the Czech Republic.

The outlier position of Hungary in terms of lacking the sense of “ownership” can be explained by the fact that - unlike in other Visegrad countries – “in Hungary there was no similar civic movement on a comparable scale. A negotiated regime change took place in which the public was not involved. The public perception of external help in building democracy reflects an absence of public ownership of the whole democratic system.” (Medve-Bálint).

### We have established and built our democracy:



Source: PASOS, October 2009

Nevertheless, there are many possible reasons for this phenomenon, and the combination of a critical perception of the changes and the feeling that democracy has been “imposed from above” could be reinforcing this outlook.

The role of the EU in the democratisation of Central European countries is also seen as crucial by the young generation. The focus-group discussions

revealed predominantly positive views of the EU in Slovakia, while the picture in the Czech Republic is mixed – on the one hand, EU membership is seen as enriching (*“we feel that we are not only Czechs, but Europeans as well”*), but on the other hand *“the EU limits our democracy, it intervenes into our laws, everything is imposed ...”*

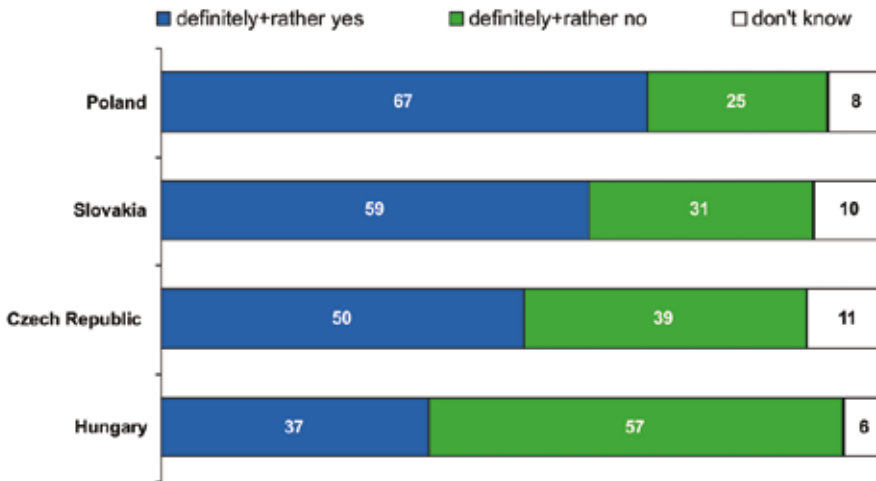
The young respondents of the focus group in Poland were still more sceptical, and “the influence of the EU on the strengthening of democracy in Poland has been perceived as

limited” (Aleksander Fuksiewicz, the analyst in Poland for the “Return to Europe” project).

The aggregated data for all four countries suggest that “the stronger the perception of external help, the lower the satisfaction with democratic changes”. However, this negative correlation has not been proved by a more detailed analysis within individual countries.

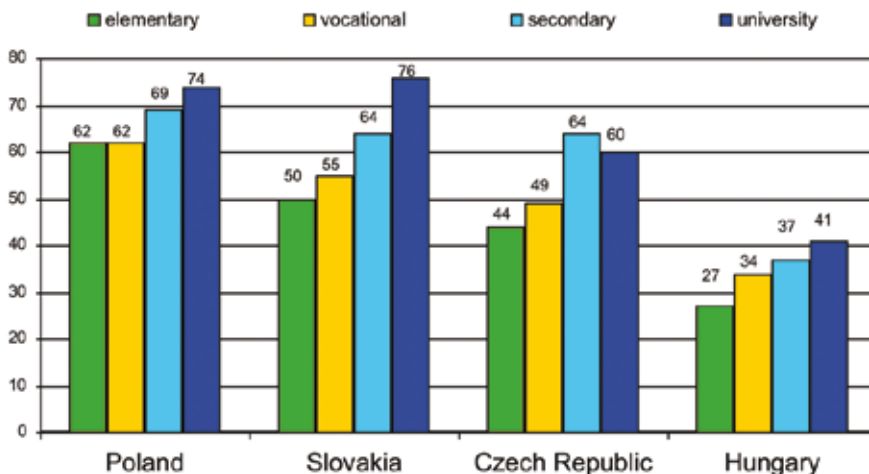
Both the focus-group discussions, as well as survey data from Slovakia, show that the EU is ascribed a strong role in the democratisation process.

**“Do you think it should or should not our country help to establish and build democracy in other countries?”**



Source: PASOS, October 2009

**“Should our country help to establish and build democracy in other countries?” (% of agreement – by education)**



Source: PASOS, October 2009

**Repaying the debt: should the Visegrad Four now assist other countries on the road to democracy?**

The new EU member states have made the transition not only from dictatorship to democracy, but also more recently from recipient of international aid to donor, and it is timely to assess how strong and deep-rooted is public support for democracy assistance to other countries. To put it another way, are the citizens of the Visegrad Four countries ready to pay back what they received, and does the previous experience of life under a dictatorship contribute to significant support for policies promoting democratisation in other countries today?

According to the poll findings, in three of the four Visegrad countries, a majority favours democracy assistance to other

countries, but the Hungarian public is more reluctant. The highest level of public support for democracy assistance to other countries is in Poland (67%), followed by Slovakia (59%), the Czech Republic (50%) and Hungary (37%).

Setting alongside each other public support for democracy assistance and perceptions about their respective countries' previous experience as recipients of donor aid, a different model is evident in each of the Visegrad Four countries.

The first model is that of Poland whose citizens are supportive of foreign aid without having a strong feeling of having been the recipients of international aid. This pattern reflects the role of Poland as a regional power, as a strong actor in the eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy on the eastern border of the EU, and as a country that is strongly involved in the democratisation of Ukraine and Belarus.

The second model is represented by Slovakia after 1998 – a country with a strong feeling of having been a recipient of aid and with a prevailing readiness to assist other countries. Slovakia has become a champion of democracy assistance mostly due to the activities of Slovak NGOs operating in the Western Balkans and post-Soviet republics. Although this engagement has decreased in the past two or three years, it is still quite prominent in the perception of the general public.

The Czech Republic presents a mixed third model – it resembles the Polish case by its weaker recipient's mentality, but it differs from Poland as well as Slovakia in manifesting a more reluctant approach towards democracy assistance.

The fourth model is represented by Hungary – with the highest percentage of those who believe that Hungarian democracy received democratic assistance from abroad but with by far the lowest support for democracy assistance to other countries today.

As for public support for more general "development aid", the population of the Visegrad Four countries do not differ very much from the public in other EU countries.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Special Eurobarometer 280 "Europeans and Development Aid" conducted in 2007.

For instance, there is high support for aid provided in order to reduce extreme poverty and starvation in the world, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.

Focus groups with young people with university education give us more insight than the standardised survey data. The general mood among young central Europeans is not very enthusiastic and idealistic.

Among Poles, the opinion prevailed that *"Poland should engage in such activities, taking into consideration, first of all, its own political interests. At the same time, it should avoid military involvement, using soft forms of supporting democracy instead (e.g. through education or humanitarian aid), taking into account the real need for such aid on the part of the countries striving for democracy."*

The self-interest motivation was dominant among the respondents (*"If a country provides political assistance, it must see some interest in that"*). Also at the EU 27 level, self-interest has been identified as one of the two main motivations underlying the provision of development aid. The second motivation is to contribute to global stability, while encouragement of democracy and good governance ranks in third place.<sup>4</sup>

Another frequently expressed viewpoint was that in democracy assistance it is necessary to respect local conditions, and not to intervene against the will of the respective country. A certain skepticism has been expressed about the tools and policies that can be applied. This cautious approach has not been supported by concrete and informed arguments; but rather amounted to a feeling, a general mood.

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*"It is important to take into consideration the conditions in the respective country. Each country has its own strong traditions that cannot be ignored. Democracy has to be implemented step by step."*

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*"We could hardly assist someone who might not want the assistance."*

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Young people perceive democracy assistance as something set apart from their personal "business". Several respondents in the Visegrad Four countries mentioned that the task of providing assistance should rest with the NGOs or with the EU (people are still looking at the EU from the outside as if the Visegrad Four countries were not yet EU members).

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*"I may be too skeptical about it, but I don't think that the state should initiate such programmes. It should rather be the role of civic organisations to promote democracy."*

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Some respondents applied a more general concept of the development aid, and emphasized mainly material assistance, combating poverty and poor health standards:

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*"Civic organisations could offer some concrete material help, like distributing food, clothes or money."*

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On the other hand, there were also some informed, supportive and engaged voices:

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*"Yes, and we already do help some countries in establishing democracy, like in the Western Balkans."*

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*"Education is also very important, as well as cultural exchange and scholarships. We could bring young people from transition countries to Hungary to make them experience how things function here. We could initiate teaching programmes in public administration institutions as well. There are already several programmes like this, similar to the EU twinning mechanism."*

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## A niche for fresh experience in democratic transition, or a case of rapidly vanishing know-how?

*An assessment of the Visegrad Four countries' policies and co-ordination on support for democracy assistance*

### WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY:

#### **Czech Republic - Shrinking budgets, low public support**

Due to the political crisis and the ill-starred end to the Czech EU Presidency, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) is currently on "stand-by" mode. The credibility of the Czech Republic in the EU has been damaged, and its political leverage in the Council is low. The domestic political formulation of long-term foreign policy goals has been lacking, with the exception of only a handful of strategic priorities. Democracy assistance policy has been downgraded on the list of Czech foreign policy priorities and, due to the budget cuts resulting from the economic crisis, the funding allocated for democracy assistance was halved in 2010.

With rare exceptions, the Czech political elites are not genuinely interested in the issue. The government's democracy assistance policy is highly dependent on personalities and is not well embedded in Czech foreign policy. It is prone to fall victim to alternation of political parties in power. Further advocacy is needed to sustain its position on the policy agenda.

**There is no public consensus** around democracy assistance policy in the Czech Republic, unlike in the case of humanitarian and development policies; as the survey for “Return to Europe” shows, public support is low. **None of the policy actors (public administration, NGOs, politicians) have invested in building public support for the policy; democracy assistance has been an elitist issue.** It is necessary to do more public awareness-raising and media work in the future.

**There is a specific transformation and democratisation know-how derived from domestic experience**, an added value and foreign policy niche for the Central European countries in the EU; **however, a significant intellectual reflection on the democratisation process is missing.** There is a need to cultivate this know-how: an intellectual endeavour is necessary on the part of all the Visegrad Four countries.

**The strengths of the Czech Republic** when implementing democracy assistance rest on the functioning communication between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the NGO sector, human resources and knowledge of the region of Eastern Europe and the Balkans and of the processes at work there. Furthermore, the reputation the Czech Republic built as a proponent of democracy assistance, and its image in the target countries, has been an asset.

In order to increase the effectiveness of Czech government support for democracy assistance, **the work of the NGOs on the ground must be more systematic.** To achieve that, at least three-year project cycles should be supported.

There is also a **lack of experience on the part of Czech NGOs of lobbying in Brussels.** Without successful lobbying, the Czech NGOs will not be able to secure funding for major EU projects in the field of democracy assistance. **There is also no joint lobbying in Brussels by Visegrad Four NGOs.**

**The ratio of financial support to democracy assistance versus official development aid (ODA) is appropriate** according to two experts;

the third one strongly disagrees. There is a notion that both the Czech ODA and democracy assistance are underfinanced. However, it is considered an asset if there is a specific budget line for democracy assistance projects. It lowers the tension between democracy assistance and humanitarian and development NGOs.

The talks launched at the European Council level during the Czech EU Presidency towards an European Consensus on Democracy (later became an EU policy framework for democracy building in EU external relations) are not regarded as tangible and realistic; it could possibly bring about more mainstreaming of the democracy assistance discourse and terminology in EU documents. However, there is no consensus on the issue; **it would be more beneficial to build a stable influential coalition that would steer democracy assistance policy in the EU.**

The **Lisbon Treaty** strengthens the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) as such; but no major improvement of the democracy assistance policy at the EU level is expected by virtue of the Treaty coming into force.

#### **WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY:**

### **Poland – Strong regional player, but weak co-operation at the Visegrad and EU level**

#### **Actors of democratisation**

The Polish experts appreciate the importance of the support granted to the Polish democratic transformation after 1989 by the countries of Western Europe, the United States and other democratic countries. Poland received significant international aid, which greatly contributed to the success of the transformation. According to the experts, **the credit for the present condition of Polish democracy – although it is still not perfect – should, to a great extent,**

go to foreign donors, even though the public is generally not aware of that.

Experts differ in their opinion as to whether Poland has a reputation abroad as an active promoter of democracy. Representatives of the public administration emphasise that Poland has a reputation as a state strongly involved in supporting democracy, especially in the countries behind its eastern borders.

Representatives of NGOs are less enthusiastic. They think that politicians and government officials overestimate the role of Poland. The experts believe that the **general climate in Polish society is favourable for international development aid**. The officials dealing with development aid say that development co-operation and support for democracy are among the priorities of the present leadership of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The representatives of the NGO sector, however, are more skeptical, and contend that it is difficult to see and assess the priorities of Polish foreign policy because **there is a lack of vision and proper strategy**.

### **Democracy assistance as an integral part of development policy**

The role of **supporting democracy is vital for development policy**, because democracy itself can drive development and therefore should be an element of any development co-operation activity - not only in Eastern Europe but also in Africa or Asia. Polish foreign assistance should be developed in such a way that **all long-term development projects should contain a democratisation element**. In those areas where democracy cannot be directly and openly supported because of the constraints imposed by undemocratic rule, the democratisation element should, in a way, be "hidden" in the form of support for civil society.

Poland should follow the example of other countries and establish an external agency outside the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which would deal with implementing Polish assistance projects, while the Ministry would continue to

play the co-ordinating and supervisory role. Poland could use the experience gathered over recent years in the **area of transformation and EU integration as well as the subsequent experience of EU membership**. Another strength of Polish aid could be Polish expertise in public administration and NGOs.

### **International factors: seeking a broad consensus for support to democracy**

The EU, whose activities are consistent and based on clear declarations, **is considered to be the most important donor supporting democracy**. At the same time, contrary opinions contend that while the EU is a strong and uncompromising player, Brussels must base its work on compromise, which is sometimes very difficult to reach, and it acts without common priorities, therefore it cannot take any action without broad consensus. The US is sometimes less "cautious" and more active in applying military force, but at the same time has had more success in financing the development of civil societies in many countries.

The policies of certain EU member states with regard to some beneficiary countries differ. Polish policy towards Russia is different from that of France or Germany. The donor state does not need to withdraw if a government – especially an undemocratic one – protests. NGOs' representatives think that the EU should not be afraid of Russia. It should include Russians into various initiatives, and show them different social models.

### **Co-operation and co-ordination: a continuing challenge**

An important element of development co-operation, including support for democracy, is **donor co-ordination**, which should serve to facilitate an optimal distribution of resources and to prevent unnecessary duplication of actions, as well as supporting mutual efforts, especially those of smaller donors. Polish experts contend that **there is scarcely any co-ordination at all**.

Co-operation within the Visegrad Group is limited to numerous consultation meetings, but real co-operation takes place only on a few individual projects.

Furthermore, **there is no co-ordination at all with other EU member states**, while the period of co-operation on individual projects with the US, so advanced in the past, and to a lesser extent with Canada, has come to end. **There is no systemic co-operation.**

The need for co-operation is not limited only to relations between donors, but concerns also relations between the public administration and NGOs. The attitude of the Polish government administration to the NGO sector fluctuates and depends on individual officials; many of them underestimate the role of the third sector. **NGOs need financial stability and capacity building**, for which insufficient funding is currently allocated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Both sides agree that both sectors need to be more professional.

#### WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY:

### **Slovakia – Keeping alive the flame of recognition in democracy assistance achievements**

Slovak experts reveal alongside a basic consensus also some divergence in terms of perceiving and evaluating the overall situation with democracy assistance. While representatives of government agencies seem to emphasize development aid as such (i.e. they focused primarily on the technicalities of its organisation), the representative of the third sector tends to view the subject from the perspective of values.

### **Democracy assistance as a fundamental government priority?**

The Slovak experts pointed out that while Slovakia belongs to the community of democratic states, other democratic countries were instrumental in Slovakia's own transformation process. During the transition period, the country has acquired ample experience in implementing necessary structural reforms. It is therefore completely natural for it to be involved in the process of promoting democracy in other parts of the world. In the course of the past decade, Slovakia has built a **positive image of democracy promoter, which it has been able to preserve until the present day.**

Promoting democracy is not only one of the principal areas of international development aid provided by Slovakia to other countries, but also ranks as one of the fundamental priorities of Slovak foreign policy.

It is difficult to evaluate the extent to which political parties in Slovakia realise the importance of promoting democracy, mostly because their programmes do not focus on the issue directly; however, there are positive examples of individual political parties' leaders who openly express their support to concrete democratisation activities around the world.

### **The case of Belarus: securing democracy assistance through development aid channels**

Slovak NGOs consider Slovakia's specific transformation path a special impulse to promoting democracy in other countries and tend to perceive the issue in the context of the domestic political situation in Slovakia. A number of democratisation projects have been carried out in the framework of Slovakia's ODA. According to the expert representing the third sector, **it was a clever and courageous decision to place Belarus on the list of countries eligible to receive ODA from Slovakia**; it focused on supporting various NGO projects aimed at building democratic institutions and developing civil society.

Placing Afghanistan on the list of Slovakia's bilateral assistance was important as an endorsement of efforts aimed at helping the country overcome the negative consequences of a long-term military conflict and civil war.

The greatest problem is that Slovakia fails to meet the stipulated level of development aid (0.33% of Gross National Income) as well as its own commitment to increase this ratio to 0.17% by 2010, which directly affects the absolute amount of funds allocated to democratisation projects. Besides, the country's state budget approved for 2010 envisages **significant cuts** (up to 60%) in the field of overall bilateral development aid, which **may also negatively affect the country's activities in the field of promoting democracy.**

All experts regarded the creation of the institutional framework for implementing development aid, including democratisation projects, **co-operation between government agencies and NGOs**, and successful projects in target countries (in the Balkans and elsewhere) as Slovakia's greatest achievements in the field of promoting democracy. The representative of the third sector emphasized especially democratisation activities in Belarus, which had a positive effect in contributing to the invitation of the country to join the EU's Eastern Partnership programme.

Representatives of Slovak NGOs perceive with anxiety the recent trend toward **reducing funds** allocated to bilateral assistance due to the financial crisis, as well as the absence of pressure towards positive change among voters of the parties of the incumbent ruling coalition, which might over time lead to a **slowing down of democratisation activities.**

### **Actors, challenges, active citizenship**

The experts agree that Slovakia's advantage in the field of promoting democracy rests on **the existence of a strong community of NGOs and a well-developed spirit of democratic activism** that goes hand in hand with better

understanding of the needs of people who live in countries ruled by undemocratic regimes. Slovakia's full-fledged membership in the European Union (EU) is extremely important, and gives the country a chance to influence the EU's positions in the field of furthering democracy. Equally important is the fact that **promoting democracy has a prominent place in Slovakia's official government programme** and strategic documents pertaining to Slovakia's international development aid.

As for co-operation and co-ordination of activities in the field of promoting democracy with international players, including projects implemented in the framework of development aid, Slovakia is focused primarily on other EU member states (bilateral co-operation with the Austrian Development Agency (ADA) is particularly important), but it has also had positive experience co-operating with Canada. As for other Visegrad Four countries, **Slovakia's co-operation with them is less intense and does not fully make use of the opportunities provided by the Visegrad Group.** NGOs that specialise in promoting democracy tend to co-operate most intensely with various organisations from the United States.

The representatives of government institutions perceive the **EU primarily as a global player in the field of development aid.** The representative of NGOs, for her part, also appreciated **positive changes implemented to the institutional framework of promoting democracy within the EU** as well as certain clear positions the EU has recently adopted with respect to critical situations in certain countries ruled by undemocratic regimes (e.g. in Iran), which they even viewed as clearer than those adopted by the United States.

According to Slovak experts, US government officials view democracy as the highest value and adequately reflect it in developing bilateral relations with other countries. Representatives of Slovak government agencies argued that **the US and the EU differed in terms of their approach to promoting democracy, techniques of providing development aid, and choice of target countries.** They believe there is a certain

rivalry between the EU and the US regarding development aid but simultaneously that there is intense communication about common objectives and methods to achieve them.

The dialogue between the EU and the US is extremely important, although the representative of the third sector pointed out that the Barack Obama administration had showed a certain reticence in the first year of Obama's tenure with respect to the goal of promoting democracy.

### **Dual-track: pragmatism versus values-driven policy**

Representatives of government agencies argued that it was possible to combine support for democratic forces in countries ruled by undemocratic regimes (e.g. Belarus) and pragmatic co-operation with these countries. This co-operation should be aimed at improving the overall situation under the following conditions: observing the principle of respecting human rights, supporting democratic institutions and civil society, and providing aid to local democratic activists and dissidents. Such a two-tier approach was more effective than sanctions according to the government officials.

The representative of the third sector disagreed with the assertion that unambiguous promotion of democracy might jeopardise pragmatic co-operation, arguing that "sophisticated diplomacy" should help and that furthering democracy should remain top priority in any event.

While representatives of government agencies welcomed and supported the moves towards a European consensus on democracy support, arguing that it should intensify co-ordination and co-operation, the representative of the third sector expressed a cautious concern, arguing that the effort to mainstream everything might curb certain crucial activities.

### **WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY:**

## **Hungary – External support to building democracy in Hungary paved the way for democracy assistance to other countries**

Experts agree that it has been mostly international factors and external constraints that have contributed to the formulation of democracy assistance as a distinct foreign policy goal. Membership in international organisations entails certain commitments that Hungary has to fulfil: taking part in activities of democracy assistance is one of those. It is clear that without having gone through the process of democratic transition, Hungary could not have included democracy assistance in its foreign policy agenda.

At the same time, this seems to have been the single, although crucially important, domestic development that has contributed to the emergence of Hungarian democracy assistance abroad. The external influence fell on fertile ground and facilitated the emergence of domestic stakeholders. The lack of an "organic" internal development leading to the formulation of a distinct policy might also underpin those institutional and financial shortcomings that characterise the Hungarian approach towards supporting democracy abroad.

### **The challenges: no strategy for democracy assistance and a lack of effective co-ordination**

Regarding the basic problems of the institutional make-up of Hungary's democracy assistance activities, experts outline similar diagnoses. In general, the NGOs formulate a more critical stance towards the issues at stake.

Besides the almost complete lack of public awareness and support for their work, the current political environment is also not favourable for democracy assistance. In addition, the legal background and the

**elaboration of a coherent strategy are still missing**, while the division of labour between government institutions is inconsistent. Political support rarely goes beyond rhetorical phrases that mainly serve the image-building of either a given party or a politician.

As of autumn 2009, **Hungary does not have an official strategy for democracy assistance**. Experts argue that the policies of both international development co-operation and democracy assistance lack effective co-ordination among government actors. While government representatives mainly criticise the low amount of budgetary funds available for democracy assistance, NGOs take a critical stance concerning how these resources are distributed. Some claim that it is not the level of expertise that is the primary determinant of gaining access to financial resources, but the quality of personal contacts and political ties.

Experts suggest that first of all the Hungarian government should identify those areas where Hungary has distinct, marketable expertise. Secondly a coherent strategy and foreign policy image has to be built around the identified assets.

Thirdly, the institutional background and mechanisms involving democracy assistance have to be established as well. There is agreement among the experts that **the experience of democratic transition** should still be the focal point of Hungary's democracy assistance efforts abroad. The second marketable good is **the experience of EU accession**. In its long-term democracy assistance strategy, Hungary will have to identify beneficiary countries that are neither European nor former communist, as within the next 5-10 years the Western Balkans and some of the CIS states (the primary targets of Hungary's democracy promotion) are likely to become more democratic and more integrated into the EU, and as such Hungarian democracy assistance would lose ground in terms of comparative advantage.

Regarding the institutional background, there should be more horizontal co-operation between governmental actors involved in

democracy assistance work, but this requires a clear demarcation of their tasks, duties and responsibilities. **It is also important that NGOs remained unaffected by political cycles and have no political affiliation in order to maintain their credibility**. Given that NGOs and the central government may also engage in co-operation with each other, the political neutrality of NGOs will always remain a sensitive issue.

### International context

Trends and developments at the international level add an important and unavoidable dimension to the design of Hungary's foreign policy image and democracy assistance strategy.

Besides being a member in several multilateral organisations that also pursue democracy assistance, at the governmental level Hungary participates in very few formal bilateral or multilateral co-operation instruments or fora. The co-operation usually remains *ad hoc*, and is restricted to specific projects. In contrast to this, **Hungarian NGOs demonstrate much more activity in initiating formal or informal partnerships** with other NGOs abroad. The Visegrad Four countries' governments do not tend to co-operate on democracy assistance.

In the near future, a substantial conceptual change could occur to worldwide democracy assistance. First of all, instead of labelling this activity as democracy assistance, **the spreading of good governance practices might gain more emphasis, and human rights aspects might also move more to the forefront**. Secondly, the advanced industrialised countries, which are currently the most active in international development assistance and democracy assistance, will have to face the challenge of China. China has embarked on providing large-scale development aid to non-democratic countries, but this support is not tied to democratic conditionality, which may make it more attractive than the "traditional" assistance offered with a normative content.

A more frequent and effective co-operation between democratic countries involved in democracy assistance would be a straightforward response to the existent challenges.

## Experts interviewed

### Hungary

Dénes Tomaj (Head of the Main Department for International Development Co-operation, Ministry for Foreign Affairs)

István Gyarmati (President and Rector of the International Centre for Democratic Transition)

Ibolya Bárány (Managing Director of HUN-IDA, the Hungarian International Development Non-Profit Company)

Zoltán Tóth (Secretary General of the Association of Central and East European Election Officers)

Bálint Molnár (Deputy Director of Freedom House Europe)

Györgyi Blahó (Coordinator, HAND – Hungarian Association of NGOs for Development and Humanitarian Aid)

Barbara Erős (Project Manager and Advisor, DemNet, Foundation for Development of Democratic Rights)

### Czech Republic

Igor Blažević (People in Need, DEMAS – Association for Democracy and Human Rights)

Gabriela Dlouhá (Director, Department of Human Rights and Transition Policy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

Vladimír Bartovic (EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy, DEMAS – Association for Democracy and Human Rights)

### Slovakia

Olga Algayerová (State Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

Eva Kolesárová (Director, Slovak Agency for International Development Cooperation – SAMRS)

Lenka Surotchak (Director, Pontis Foundation)

### Poland

Wojciech Tworowski (Executive Director, Grupa Zagranica (a network of Polish NGOs dealing with development aid)

Marek Ziółkowski (Director of Development Cooperation Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

