

# The impact of the Central and Eastern European EU member states on the EU's democracy promotion policy towards Central Asia

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Research on the involvement of the Central and Eastern European (CEE) member states of the European Union (EU) in the EU's external policies remains very scarce, in particular when it concerns regions beyond the Eastern neighbourhood. In contributing to this literature, the paper focuses on the involvement of the new member states in the EU's policy towards Central Asia. In particular, it explores whether they seek to advance democracy in Central Asia through the EU.

In the last few years, several of the CEE EU member states have been actively developing a foreign policy towards Central Asia (Bossuyt, forthcoming). At the same time, the CEE EU member states have 'matured' as policy entrepreneurs within EU foreign policy-making, in the sense that they increasingly seek to project their national foreign policy interests onto the EU level and to punch above their weight (Baun and Marek 2013; Bilčík 2010; Pomorska 2011). In addition, they have emerged as staunch promoters of democracy, in particular in the post-Soviet space (see Introduction of this volume). Not surprisingly, therefore, the past decade has seen a growing number of attempts by CEE member states to channel their pro-democracy agenda into the EU's foreign policy (Kucharczyk and Lovitt 2008a; Petrova 2014; see also the contributions by Lightfoot & Szent Iványi, Berti & Onuch, and Cadier & Mikulova in this volume). This raises the question whether the CEE countries are also seeking to leave their mark on the EU's democracy promotion policy towards the Central Asian republics.

Several studies have noted that EU member states often attempt to upload their national foreign policy goals, priorities and approaches onto the EU level, because EU membership can allow the member states to pursue and even amplify foreign policy objectives in specific regions or for specific themes beyond those attainable with national capabilities (Hill and Wong 2011, p.222; Keukeleire and Delreux 2014, p.132; Nasra 2011, Denca 2009, p.402; Popescu 2010; Wong and Hill 2011, p.7). Indeed, if a member state successfully manages to upload a national foreign policy goal onto the EU level, it can rely on budgetary, diplomatic and economic support from the EU institutions and other member states, which allows them to pursue that national foreign policy goal more intensively and with a higher potential impact (Keukeleire and Delreux 2014, p.132; Denca 2009, p.402). The CEE member states see Central Asia as a source of instability and security threats; however, they have limited means to get involved in

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<sup>1</sup> This is a draft version of a paper that will appear as a book chapter in Benedetta Berti, Kristina Mikulova and Nicu Popescu (eds), *Democratization of Foreign Policy? The Rise of Central and East European States on the World Stage*, Routledge.

the region and to provide direct development assistance. Therefore, it can be expected that they will attempt to advance democracy in Central Asia through the EU.

To empirically explore this expectation, the research draws on data gathered through document analysis, academic literature and elite interviews with diplomats and officials from CEE member states and the EU institutions. The empirical analysis focuses on four CEE countries that can be considered 'most-likely cases': on the one hand, Poland, Slovakia and Lithuania, which have shown to be the most eager to promote democracy in the post-Soviet space, and on the other hand, Latvia, which has a strong ambition to become more involved in Central Asia, both bilaterally and through the EU.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section elaborates on the expectation that the CEE member states may attempt to advance democracy in Central Asia through the EU. It does so by building on insights from existing studies on the CEE countries as democracy promoters and the involvement of the CEE countries in the EU's external policies as well as the literature on bottom-up Europeanization of EU foreign policy. In the next section, we empirically analyse whether Poland, Slovakia, Lithuania and Latvia are seeking to leave their imprint on the EU's democracy promotion policy towards Central Asia. The empirical analysis finds that, in stark contrast to their preferences regarding their more immediate Eastern neighbourhood, the CEE countries display a very low interest in spreading democracy to Central Asia through the EU, and hence refrain from contributing to the EU's democracy promotion policy towards the region. Poland is to some extent an exception, as it appears to be most active in terms of seeking to influence the EU's democracy promotion efforts in Central Asia. Nevertheless, compared to its leadership role in the EU's democracy promotion policy towards the Eastern neighbourhood, Poland remains rather absent when it comes to Central Asia. The remaining part of the paper then explores how the CEE countries' lack of interest in contributing to the EU's democracy promotion efforts in Central Asia can be explained. The paper concludes with a summary of the main findings, and a reflection on what the findings tell us about the CEE member states as foreign policy entrepreneurs at the EU level and as agents of democracy promotion.

### **The CEE member states as (EU) foreign policy entrepreneurs**

While Central Asia takes up only a secondary role among the foreign policy priorities of the CEE EU member states, many of them have been actively building stronger ties with the region in the past few years (Bossuyt, forthcoming; Jēkabsone 2013; Marin 2013). This should be seen mostly as part of a broader trend among the new member states. Both in light of the economic crisis and the pressures of globalization, and as a result of 'top down' Europeanization, many of the new member states have been in the process of further redefining their national foreign policy, manifesting an increased interest in bolstering ties with countries and regions beyond their immediate vicinity.

At the same time, the CEE EU member states have 'matured' as policy entrepreneurs within EU foreign policy-making, in the sense that they increasingly seek to project their national foreign policy interests onto the EU level and to punch above their weight (Baun and Marek 2013; Bilčík 2010; Pomorska 2011). Indeed, the new member states have moved beyond their respective accession legacies and have sought

to project their foreign policy interests onto the EU level (Baun and Marek 2013). After a decade of institutional adaptation to the workings of the EU foreign policy-making process, most CEE member states now master the game and are increasingly able to play along with the older member states (see e.g. Bilčík 2010). This has been most apparent in the context of EU relations with the Eastern neighbours and the Western Balkans (Angelescu 2011a, 2011b; Baun and Marek 2013; Galbreath and Lamoreaux 2013; Kesa 2011; Pomorska 2011; Vandecasteele, Bossuyt and Orbie 2013). Also in the field of external democracy promotion, the CEE countries have been trying to influence the EU's agenda, especially (but not exclusively) in the context of the Eastern Partnership (Kucharczyk and Lovitt 2008a, 2008b; Petrova 2014; Szent Ivanyi 2014; see also the contributions by Lightfoot & Szent Iványi, Berti & Onuch, and Cadier & Mikulova in this volume). In doing so, they have sought, *inter alia*, to channel their transition experience in the EU's policy (Szent Iványi 2014). From this perspective, given that the five Central Asian states are all former Soviet countries, the EU's democracy promotion policy towards the region might also be perceived by the CEE member states as another context for the transfer of their transition experience.

Although the CEE member states see Central Asia as a source of instability and security threats, they have limited means to get involved in the region and to provide direct development assistance. However, by uploading national foreign policy objectives, priorities and approaches to the EU level, EU member states are often able to pursue and even expand national foreign policy objectives (in specific regions or with regard to specific themes) beyond those attainable with domestic capabilities (Keukeleire and Delreux 2014, p.132). Indeed, if a state successfully manages to upload a national foreign policy goal onto the EU level, it can rely on budgetary, diplomatic and economic support from the EU institutions and other member states, which allows them to pursue that national foreign policy goal more intensively and with a higher potential impact (Keukeleire and Delreux 2014, p.132, also see Hill and Wong 2011, p.222). This further adds to the expectation that they will attempt to advance democracy in Central Asia through the EU.

In the next section, we empirically explore this expectation. To do so, we rely on data gathered through document analysis of official documents from the EU and CEE member states, and interviews with EU and CEE officials. We focus on four CEE countries, which constitute 'most likely cases' to determine whether CEE member states try to advance democracy in Central Asia through the EU: on the one hand, Poland, Slovakia and Lithuania, which have shown to be the most eager to promote democracy in the post-Soviet space (Galbreath and Lamoreaux 2007; Jonavicius 2008; Kucharczyk and Lovitt 2008a, 2008b; Petrova 2011, 2014; Raciuc 2006), and on the other hand, Latvia, which has a strong ambition to become more involved in Central Asia, both bilaterally and through the EU (Bossuyt, forthcoming). This means that if we do not find evidence among these four cases of attempts to influence the EU's democracy promotion policy towards Central Asia, we can assume that the other CEE member states will also not attempt to leverage their membership in the EU to support democratization in the region.

## **Advancing democracy in Central Asia through the EU?**

### *Poland*

Of the four CEE countries under investigation, Poland has been the most active in terms of seeking to influence the EU's democracy promotion efforts in Central Asia. Nevertheless, compared to Poland's leading role in steering the EU's democracy promotion policy towards the Eastern neighbourhood, its involvement in the EU's democracy promotion policy towards Central Asia has been rather limited. Also at the bilateral level, although Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are priority countries of Polish development assistance,<sup>2</sup> Poland provides little democracy assistance to the region (Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2012).

So far, there have been three ways in which Poland has sought to influence the EU's democracy promotion policy towards Central Asia. A first signal that Poland is keen – at least to some extent - to leverage its membership in the EU to advance democracy in Central Asia came during its Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2011. At the annual European Development Days, which are jointly organized by the Council Presidency and the European Commission, Poland convened a High Level Panel (HLP) dedicated entirely to Central Asia. The HLP was focused on the question how the EU could contribute to the development of the Central Asian countries, and, in doing so, how the EU could combine economic development with the concept of deep democracy (European Development Days 2011). This fitted in neatly with the overarching theme of the 2011 edition of the European Development Days, namely 'Democracy and Development', a topic which Poland had chosen in light of the Arab Spring and Europe's response to it (European Development Days 2011). Poland also convened a HLP on 'How to share transformation experiences', which featured then President of the Kyrgyz Republic, Roza Otunbayeva, as high-level speaker (European Development Days 2011). This might indicate that Poland believes that the transition experience of the CEE member states could, or should, also be shared with countries in Central Asia, at least in some areas.

A second way in which Poland has sought to leave its mark on the EU's democracy promotion efforts in Central Asia has been through the COEST meetings, which prepare the work of the Foreign Affairs Council on issues pertaining to the Eastern Partnership (EaP), Russia and Central Asia. While most COEST meetings on Central Asia feature little discussion and generally pass by very quickly - in sharp contrast to the COEST meetings on Russia and on the EaP -, Poland has been slightly more vocal than others when it comes to democracy and human rights issues in Central Asia (author's interview with EU official, 20 February 2014; author's interview with EU official, 3 June 2014). A case in point is the enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with Kazakhstan. Dissatisfied with the formulation of the clauses pertaining to human rights and democracy in the draft text of the agreement, Poland has made annotations to the draft text, trying to upgrade the commitment to human rights and democracy

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<sup>2</sup> Poland's multiannual programme for development cooperation in 2012-2015 distinguishes between two groups of geographical priorities. While the first group covers the Eastern Partnership countries, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are included in the second group, together with 12 other developing countries (Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2012).

expressed in these clauses (author's interview with EU official, 3 June 2014; author's interview with Polish official, 24 April 2014).

A final – and perhaps most noteworthy – way in which Poland has attempted to influence the EU's democracy promotion efforts in Central Asia has been through the European Endowment for Democracy (EED), which was established in 2013. Designed - at the initiative of Poland – to complement the EU's existing instruments for promoting democracy in the neighbourhood, the EED supports human rights and democracy activists and independent journalists and media in the ENP beneficiary countries. At the second meeting of the EED's Board of Governors, held in June 2014, Poland presented a proposal to extend the EED's mandate to Russia and Central Asia (author's interview with Polish official, 24 April 2014; European Endowment for Democracy 2014). However, although a decision on the extension of the mandate was postponed until the next meeting, it is unlikely that the mandate will be extended to Central Asia given that the EED already operates under a tight budget. The Polish proposal to include Central Asia in the mandate of the EED very much reflects Poland's belief that if change comes in Central Asia, it will come from the grassroots level (author's interview with Polish official, 24 April 2014).

### *Lithuania*

In the past decade, Lithuania has emerged as a champion of democracy promotion, particularly in its Eastern neighbourhood. Indeed, with 14 per cent of its bilateral development assistance in 2003-2013 going to democracy and human rights, and another 12 per cent to civil society development, Lithuania has been eager to spread democracy beyond its borders (Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013). However, only a tiny portion of its bilateral democracy assistance has been reserved for Central Asia (Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013). Similarly, when Lithuanian leaders speak of the need to spread democracy further East, into the territories of the former Soviet states, this rarely includes Central Asian countries (see e.g. Racius 2006). This relative lack of interest in promoting democracy in Central Asia is reflected at the EU level, which has witnessed hardly any Lithuanian attempts at influencing the EU's democracy support to Central Asia (author's interview with EU official, 3 June 2014). A notable exception has been its role in annotating the draft text of the enhanced PCA with Kazakhstan. Like Poland, the country was dissatisfied with the formulation of the clauses pertaining to human rights and democracy and therefore sought to upgrade the commitment to human rights and democracy expressed in the draft text of the agreement (author's interview with EU official, 3 June 2014).

### *Slovakia*

Slovakia's involvement in the EU's democracy promotion policy towards Central Asia is even more limited, if not non-existing. Like the other CEE countries examined here, democracy support has been one of the sectoral priorities of Slovakia's bilateral aid in the last decade. However, although Central Asian countries have been priority countries of Slovak development assistance, in particular in the period 2003-2008, none of its assistance to Central Asia has so far been aimed at democracy support (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic 2003, 2013). This complete disinterest in advancing democracy in Central Asia is mirrored at the EU level, with virtually no Slovak attempts at influencing the EU's democracy promotion efforts in Central Asia (author's interview with EU official, 20 February 2014; author's interview with EU official, 3 June 2014).

## *Latvia*

Compared to the three other CEE countries under investigation, Latvia has a slightly less pronounced profile when it comes to democracy promotion. Nevertheless, like nearly all CEE member states, it dedicates a significant amount of its bilateral development assistance to democracy support (Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013, 2014). As a small country with a relatively low GDP, Latvia has limited means to provide development assistance. Nevertheless, it is the only CEE country that is active as a donor in all five Central Asian states, although the funding provided is (of course) limited (Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013). More importantly, among the Latvian projects implemented in the region, some are in the fields of good governance and the rule of law (Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014).. However, none are targeted at democracy promotion *stricto sensu*, such as independent media and civil rights. Moreover, Latvia's apparent interest in advancing democracy in Central Asia has (yet) not translated into an active involvement in this domain at the EU level. Indeed, although Latvia has expressed a strong ambition to become more involved in the EU's policy towards Central Asia (Bossuyt, forthcoming), it is not interested in contributing to the EU's democracy promotion efforts in the region (author's interview with EU official, 20 February 2014; author's interview with Latvian official, 27 February 2014; author's interview with EU official, 3 June 2014).

### **Explaining the limited involvement**

Contrary to what we expected based on the literature, there is little empirical evidence that CEE member states are seeking to leave their imprint on the EU's democracy promotion policy towards Central Asia. Even Poland, which has emerged as the main champion of democracy promotion at the EU level, in particular towards the EU's neighbourhood, has been rather absent, with the notable exception of its proposal to extend the mandate of the European Endowment for Democracy to Central Asia. In the remainder of the paper, we put forward some tentative explanations for the limited involvement of the CEE countries in the EU's democracy promotion policy towards Central Asia. As we will see, there does not appear to be one specific explanation, but rather a combination of factors. Given that the CEE member states are a diverse group of countries, it is important to note that not all factors apply equally to all the CEE countries.

To begin with, although the CEE member states have specific foreign policy interests in Central Asia (see e.g. Bossuyt, forthcoming, Marin 2013; Jekabsone 2013), clearly, the region is not a priority for them to the extent that the EaP countries are. Therefore, although the CEE countries see Central Asia as a source of instability and security threats, they are reluctant to invest their already scarce financial and diplomatic resources in supporting democracy in the region (author's interview with EU official, 3 June 2014). Similarly, due to their limited financial means, many of the CEE countries tend not to employ a separate staff member to follow up EU policies with Central Asia at their Permanent Representation to the EU. Indeed, in many cases, the Brussels-based diplomat responsible for Central Asia also has to follow up the EaP countries. Since the latter are much more important for the CEE member states, they take up most of the diplomat's attention, which leaves little time to focus on Central Asia.

Importantly, the reluctance to 'invest' financial and diplomatic resources - either bilaterally or at the EU level - to promote democracy in Central Asia is further exacerbated by their belief that Central Asia presents a much more challenging terrain for western-style democratization (author's interview with Polish official, 24 April 2014; author's interview with EU official, 3 June 2014). In contrast to the EaP countries, they perceive their common ground with the Central Asian states as being limited. Therefore, the CEE countries fear that their transition experience in the area of democracy – whether offered bilaterally or through the EU - will be of limited value. In addition, the region has basic problems of development, which they think needs attention first (author's interview with Latvian official, 24 February 2014).

Moreover, unlike their hands-on approach towards the Belarusian regime, most CEE governments prefer not to confront the authoritarian leaders in Central Asia on issues of democracy and human rights in view of safeguarding their economic and security interests (author's interview with EU official, 20 February 2014; author's interview with Latvian official, 27 February 2014; author's interview with EU official, 3 June 2014). This clearly shows that democracy promotion is not on top of their agenda for Central Asia. Nevertheless, this does not mean that they all refrain from promoting democracy in the region. Although the CEE countries doubt whether there is any fertile ground for western-style democratization in Central Asia, several believe that if change comes, it will come from the grassroots level. However, given their limited means to give civil society support in the region, they try to encourage the EU to focus its democratization efforts in Central Asia more on the grassroots level, as illustrated by Poland's proposal to extend the mandate of the EED to Central Asia. In addition, if there is any potential for democratization in the region, the CEE countries believe it is in Kyrgyzstan, and possibly also Kazakhstan (author's interview with EU official, 3 June 2014; author's interview with Polish official, 24 April 2014).

## **Conclusion**

Drawing on several insights from the literature, this paper started from the expectation that the CEE member states would attempt to advance democracy in Central Asia through the EU. However, the empirical analysis largely disconfirmed this expectation. Focusing on four 'most-likely cases', namely Poland, Lithuania, Slovakia and Latvia, the analysis revealed that the CEE countries are not seeking to promote democracy in Central Asia, neither bilaterally nor through the EU. In offering an explanation for this finding, the paper pointed to several factors. Primarily, it seems that the CEE member states are unwilling to spend their scarce political and financial capital - be it bilaterally or at the EU level - to support democratization in Central Asia, not only because it is not a priority region, at least not compared to the EaP, but also because they feel their limited resources will simply be lost given the perception they have of the region as a difficult terrain for western-style democratization.

What do these findings tell us about the CEE member states as foreign policy entrepreneurs at the EU level and as agents of democracy promotion? To begin with, we observed some differences in the involvement of the CEE member states at the EU level. Poland, in particular, stands out from the others, as it is the only CEE country that has so far sought to influence the EU's democracy promotion policy

towards Central Asia. In this respect, it could be argued that the case of Poland supports the assumption that member states may attempt to upload national foreign policy goals, priorities and approaches relating to specific regions or for specific themes onto the EU level, because their membership in the EU can allow them to pursue and even amplify those foreign policy objectives beyond those attainable with national capabilities. Nevertheless, it needs to be kept in mind that Poland's involvement has been limited compared to its substantial efforts at uploading its democracy agenda for the EaP to the EU level. The reason why Poland appears to stand out from the others might be because it has a stronger financial and administrative capacity – and thus more diplomatic staff -, than the other CEE member states.

With respect to the CEE countries as agents of democracy promotion, the findings echo previous research, which indicated that despite their 'idealist' reputation as democracy promoters and their expressions of personal and official solidarity with post-communist countries struggling with democracy, the CEE governments advance democracy abroad primarily as a pragmatic approach to pursuing certain foreign policy objectives, not least towards their immediate neighbourhood (Petrova 2011). This explains why in a region like Central Asia their pro-democracy agenda falters in the face of more 'hard' foreign policy goals, such as energy and commercial interests. In this regard, it seems that their behaviour is not that much different from the older EU member states.

At the same time, the paper also found further evidence of what distinguishes the CEE countries from older EU member states as agents of democracy promotion, namely their strong emphasis on civil society support (cf. Petrova 2014). Poland's call to the EU for more support to civil society in Central Asia, premised on the belief that if change is to occur in the region, it will come from the grassroots level, mirrors Poland's – and other CEE countries' – previous calls for more civil society assistance in Eastern Europe, not least in Belarus, where many CEE countries are directly engaged in civil society support. This preoccupation with civil society development shows that as new agents of democracy promotion the CEE countries seem to borrow heavily from their own democratization experience (cf. Petrova 2014).

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