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TRANSITION EXPERIENCE

IN THE OFFICIAL INTERNATIONAL

DEVELOPMENT

COOPERATION POLICY

OF HUNGARY

Introduction

The formulation of the international development cooperation policies of the new EU member states (NMS), and in particular Hungary, was motivated by the states' accession to international donor organizations such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and their prospect of joining the European Union (EU). Looking at the international development cooperation (IDC) policy documents of the NMSs, the influence of the general values, goals and priorities of these organizations along with those of the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals (MDG) are clearly visible. While this influence determined the main track of the policy, the NMS also added a new element to their international development cooperation: sharing their experiences, gained through the political, economic and social transitions of the 1990s and early 2000s, with countries embarking on the road to democracy, market economy and an open society. With regards to their financial targets set by the Monterrey Consensus and reiterated by the European Union in its May 2005 Council Conclusions, these countries still lag behind even a decade after (re-launching) their IDC. At the same time, though, the transition element, which they have added to the European agenda, seems to gain more ground in the recent years.

This paper aims to present how the so-called transition experience appears in the official, bilateral development cooperation policy of Hungary and it also intends to highlight the challenges of researching the topic. Naturally the country's transition experiences do not only appear in the development activities of the Hungarian State. These elements can also be found in the international development work of Hungarian civil society organizations. However, the present paper focuses on the official policy and it does not aim at presenting the activities of the civil sector. The paper builds on the extensive analysis of primary sources – official Hungarian and EU documents. While initially planned, the author regrets that the statistical analysis of transition cooperation in the bilateral IDC of Hungary was not possible due to the scarcity of publicly accessible statistical data. Moreover, the blurry and overlapping terms used in official documents render differentiation among the nature of the implemented projects problematic.

The paper will conclude with recommendations concerning how the current system could be developed, and how the Hungarian authorities (maybe in cooperation with their Visegrad counterparts) could use the still developing European framework to put more emphasis on their international development priorities.

1. Article 42 of the Monterrey Consensus of 2002 reiterated as financial target the 0.7% of GNP as ODA that donor countries should meet in order to achieve internationally agreed development goals and objectives, including the Millennium Development Goals. The May 2005 Council Conclusions (Article 4.) set 2015 as the target date for the EU to achieve the 0.7% ODA/GNI target. This conclusion was among the first official EU documents dealing with development policy that considered the new member states as a group within the EU setting separate targets for them. By 2010, they were supposed to reach 0.17%, and by 2015, 0.33%. None of the new member states did reach the target.

1. Transition experience in the European context

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the regime changes that had taken place in Central and Eastern Europe, the countries of the region engaged themselves in a lengthy transformation process: a transition from authoritarian regimes to democracy and from centrally planned to market economy. This dual transition also triggered a third process: the opening up of the societies. Through these transformations in multiple spheres, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe gathered “a wealth of knowledge in managing these long, complex processes” (Piebalgs 2011). When setting up their new international development cooperation policies, the NMSs generally referred to this experience as a component they wished to add to the already existing objectives and instruments in the European toolkit.

As the new member states joined the European Union, their policy preferences slowly found their way into the development policy of the EU, as well. In Article 33 of the European Consensus on Development (2006), the EU identified transition management as a new element that the EU’s development policy can capitalize on. However, the document did not identify what it exactly meant by transition experience and how the EU planned to build on it.

The European Commission’s DG Development’s (DG DEV) initiative to overcome these two shortcomings was the European Transition Compendium (ETC), a collection of the new member states’ transition experiences. This Compendium serves to create the foundation for a structured approach to the use of the transition experience on the EU level, and by doing so, it contributes to the fulfillment of the European Consensus. The document intends to enhance the contribution of the new member states, and by making their expertise available for wider audiences, it is assumed to increase the countries’ involvement in the EU’s development policy (European Commission n.d., ii.).

The ETC was compiled based on replies received to a questionnaire the DG DEV sent out to all new member states, a clarification visit of the Commission’s expert in all twelve countries and publications on various aspects of the transition processes. Six broad policy areas have been studied and included in the Compendium: ‘Agriculture, Land Market Reform and Environment Related Issues’, ‘Democracy, Human Rights and Political/Institutional Reforms’, ‘Economic Reforms – Transition to a Market-Based Economy’, ‘Human Development’, ‘Management of External Aid’ and ‘Regional and Local Development’. In 2010, a more than 300-page collection of experiences and best practices was published, and in 2011 it was made available as an online database. Through this modern platform, it is possible to update the database and add new data to it. Interested partners can also get in touch with the experts, who contributed to the compendium, or can inquire to be put into contact with them.

Motivated by the momentum that the Arab Spring gave to the issue of democracy promotion in the EU, eight countries (the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, the Slovak Republic and Slovenia) presented a non-paper in February 2011 with the intention to lobby for the stronger incorporation of transition cooperation into the EU’s external relations. In their non-paper, they encourage the EU to develop a more systematic approach towards using the transition experience in order to support political and economic reforms in the neighboring regions. It also asks the EU to respond flexibly to the needs of

partner countries, to improve aid effectiveness while linking its external and development policy, and increasing the ownership of the EU development policy in emerging donor countries (Czech Republic et al. 2011).

Similar goals appear in the European Commission's recent communication, which calls for the EU to support sustainable change in transition societies. The EU is determined to support democratization all over the world. However, in order to facilitate the sustainability of democratic reforms, the EU should take into consideration the needs of the local actors when providing aid or assistance. It should also involve all stakeholders, and especially civil society actors, in the process. Strong emphasis should be placed on achieving development results early on, since that can give further impetus to the process. To improve its effectiveness, the Commission suggests that the EU should make better use of its already existing tools and instruments, such as the ETC, and should improve cooperation among the EU member states (European Commission 2012). While the implementation of the communication's recommendations is still to be seen, one can already tell that the issue of transition cooperation is in the limelight. It is a good occasion to examine how Hungary have used its own transition experience, how it could improve it and whether there are good practices to be shared on the EU level.

2. Defining transition experience and transition cooperation

To examine how transition experience and transition cooperation appears in the Hungarian IDC policy, and how it fits into a broader context, one first needs to clarify the term itself. This already presents us with challenges, since there is no unified definition of the term. Depending on the actor, it might include a wide range of policy areas and the actual content of this experience varies from country to country.

Concerning the definitions, the countries incorporating their transition experience into their IDC policy do not specify what they exactly mean by the term. Depending on the donor, transition experience appears and is used in different policy areas. While the Czech Republic, for example, concentrates on sharing its transition experience in the field of democratization and social transition through the empowerment of the civil society (MFA Czech Republic 2010), other donor countries do not narrow down the scope this much.

According to another, much broader definition used in the aforementioned non-paper, the term ‘transition cooperation’ includes any “specific technical support which uses the experience of the EU and its Member States from political and economic reforms in areas such as democratic institution building, public administration, judicial and security sector reform, public finance management, market economy reforms, trade liberalization, privatization of state owned enterprises, environment protection and management, etc.” (Czech Republic et al. 2011). Thus, this definition incorporates the experience of political and economic transition, but does not mention separately the experiences gathered through societal transformations. In this regard, the earlier mentioned European Transition Compendium shows an even broader picture, referring to all three processes of transition and listing six overarching areas where the NMSs’ experience can be used. (European Commission 2011).

Additionally, it has to be mentioned that the countries of Central and Eastern Europe also prepared for their accession to the European Union while managing their political and economic transition process in the 1990s and early 2000s. Hence, their transition experience has a special EU character in as much as their transformation also entailed the adoption of the European *acquis communautaire* in the field of common EU policies. Nonetheless, the actual content of the so-called transition experience differs from country to country, since the reforming states often selected different paths to reach democracy and market economy as their end goals. This meant taking different policy decisions, but also involving different governmental and even non-governmental actors (ministries, local authorities, agencies, trade unions, civil society organizations etc). Consequently the experience lays with a wide variety of actors, active in a wide variety of policy areas.

Having seen that the so-called transition experience is clearly not a unified block of knowledge and is dispersed not only in different policy areas but also among different actors, we argue that transition cooperation is not to be understood as one specific area of international development cooperation either. It should rather be seen as a holistic approach to development – specific to the new EU member states – that aims at sharing their experience with beneficiaries in any relevant policy area.

3. Transition experience in the Hungarian case

Contemporary Hungarian development policy was formulated between 2001 and 2003, as a response to the requirements posed by the approaching EU accession of the country. While having a functional international development cooperation policy was an important prerequisite to joining the EU, certain authors point out that development issues were hardly discussed nor negotiated during the pre-accession phase. At this stage the EU did not require the detailed development of the institutional and legislative environment or of a strategic approach. Hence, the new member states, among them Hungary, was rather unprepared for the implementation of the European development policy after 2004 (Lightfoot and Lindenhovius Zubizarreta 2010, 177-178; Paragi 2010, 196).

While taking into account the goals and practices of the OECD and the EU, the Hungarian development policy is based on national interests and peculiarities. Its goal is to support the social and economic catching-up of developing countries and countries in transition (MFA Hungary 2003). Hungary developed and accepted its first “Concept Paper on the International Development Cooperation of the Republic of Hungary” in July 2001. This short document explained the necessity of having an international development cooperation policy, outlined its foundations, objectives and priorities. Among its objectives, it lists:

- maintaining and supporting international peace and security, contributing to the creation and maintenance of regional stability;
- realizing of sustainable development in developing countries;
- protecting human rights and equality, strengthening democracy and civil structures, improving the conditions of national minorities, supporting the issue of autonomies;
- ameliorating the general conditions of Hungarians living in the neighboring countries;
- supporting initiatives striving for economic and social development (basic living conditions, health care and basic education);
- implementing the requirements of good governance (democratic, corruption-free and effective public administration);
- protecting the environment, natural living conditions and their development;
- securing active participation in the international institutions of development cooperation;
- obtaining OECD DAC membership in the long term.

As the Concept Paper is still the only official document outlining the country’s overall development policy,² we can assume that the objectives have not changed since 2001. In line with that, we can see that transition cooperation is not an objective in itself in the Hungarian development cooperation.

2. No legal framework and multi-annual development strategy has been developed until today. With this Hungary is the only Visegrad country not having either of these two strategic documents. There is a mid-term strategy in the making at the moment though, which could finally facilitate planning ahead in the field of international development cooperation in Hungary.

However, the “transfer of Hungarian experiences related to the regime change” appeared already in this document as a possible priority area, where Hungary could build on its comparative advantages in development policy, if it was needed in the future partner countries (MFA Hungary 2001, Part 2).³ Such experiences include the creation and operation of democratic structures, the creation of conditions for transition to market economy, privatization, support for SMEs, implementation of necessary conditions of good governance etc. (MFA Hungary 2003). These elements are reiterated as sectoral priorities in later documents, as well (MFA Hungary 2006a; MFA Hungary n.d, 2). The primary tool for sharing Hungary’s transition experience with beneficiary countries is technical assistance, but project-based development cooperation can also serve this purpose (MFA Hungary 2003).

Hungarian development cooperation was operational by 2003, and the target countries of bilateral Hungarian Official Development Aid (ODA) and Official Aid (OA) were also identified the same year. The initial list⁴ has been modified since then and the currently valid list of partner countries was drawn up in 2008 along three categories (MFA Hungary 2008b, 13):

- Partner countries based on medium-term Country Strategy Papers: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Republic of Moldova, Palestinian Authorities, Vietnam;
- Project-based partner countries and regions: Sub-Saharan Africa, Cambodia, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, FYROM, Mongolia, Montenegro, Ukraine, Yemen;
- Partner countries based on international commitment: Afghanistan, Iraq.

In 2011, the main beneficiaries of Hungarian IDC were Afghanistan, Serbia, Kosovo, Moldova, Ukraine, Vietnam, Kenya and the Palestinian Authorities (MFA Hungary 2012, 2). Naturally, Hungary’s transition experience is relevant first and foremost to those partners that are currently undergoing political, economic and social reforms. These are mainly the countries of Eastern Europe (Moldova and Ukraine) and the countries of the Western Balkan (Serbia, Kosovo – but as the list of partners show, Montenegro and Macedonia (FYROM) are also regular targets of Hungarian development cooperation). Those among them having an EU membership perspective can also benefit from the Hungarian experience in adopting the *acquis communautaire* in sectoral policy areas.

Since Hungary does not have long- or medium-term development strategies, one must rely on the annual reports of the country’s development activity published by the Ministry

3. The document has not been translated to English. In general, it is problematic that the Hungarian documents are not available in English. The English documents that are still accessible on the old website of the MFA (although only through a direct link) do not correspond to any document published on the Hungarian section of the site. Moreover, the foundational documents of Hungarian development cooperation policy are not available on the current governmental website functional since 2010. Transparency of the MFA in this domain certainly has room for improvement.

4. The original list in 2003 contained four strategic partner countries (Serbia and Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Vietnam, and the Palestinian Authorities), six further partner countries (FYROM-Macedonia, Republic of Moldova, China, Mongolia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine), four least developed countries (Ethiopia, Yemen, Cambodia, Laos) and two countries based on international commitments (Afghanistan and Iraq).

of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the few Country Strategy Papers in order to get an overview how transition experience is used. It is obvious from these documents that one of the main areas of IDC is sharing Hungary's political and economic transition experience. Already in 2004, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs mentioned those technical assistance cooperations as most successful which had a transition element (MFA Hungary 2005, 3). This tendency continues in 2005, as well (MFA Hungary 2006b, 7). Furthermore, the annual report about 2006 declares that focusing on Hungary's comparative advantages and on sharing its transition experience was the good policy choice (MFA Hungary 2007a, 1). In the meantime, there is no information about what exactly the government considers to be a cooperation sharing transition experience, which projects are enlisted under this category and what their exact content is. The evaluation of these projects is not public either. As a result, we do not know what counts as successful technical assistance.

As cooperation evolved with the strategic partners and as their medium-term country strategies were set up, Hungary started to define in which areas/sectors it intends to work with the given countries. With Bosnia and Herzegovina, it was initially the transfer of political and economic transition experience (MFA Hungary 2006b, 8), then eradication of poverty and support for good governance (MFA Hungary 2008a, 10; MFA Hungary 2008c, 1–2, 12–14). In the Serbian case, transition experience transfer was a strategic priority from the beginning, both in the field of economy and politics. In the Country Strategy, strengthening Serbia's EU perspective and transferring EU integration expertise became the main priorities (MFA Hungary 2007b). Moldova's significance in Hungary's development policy rose in 2007, and cooperation focused mainly on the harmonization of the country's legislation with the EU *acquis* in several sectoral fields, e.g. border management, customs, trade, agriculture (MFA Hungary 2008a, 15–16). According to the annual report of 2008, Moldova's Country Strategy was developed for 2009–2011, but neither the document itself, nor its summary is publicly available (MFA Hungary 2009, 25). While Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Moldova are the main partners of Hungary, other countries of the Western Balkan and Eastern Europe also benefit from development assistance containing transition elements on a case by case basis.

The use of the expression 'transition experience', however, is not consequent in these documents. This problem is a natural result of the fact that the term had not been defined previously. The Concept Paper of 2001 mentioned it as an area in which Hungary had comparative advantage, whereas the annual report of 2005 cites it as a sectoral part of the development policy (MFA Hungary 2006b, 2).⁵ Looking at the annual activity reports in detail brings further confusion, since the transfer of transition experience is mentioned in multiple spheres over the years, ranging from democratic institution building, through development of market economy. Moreover, it is closely connected to sharing the experience of EU accession in e.g. agriculture, taxation or border management.

Even though the broad priority areas were outlined in the annual reports and country strategies, it is still problematic to select which projects had a transition element. While the MFA identified transition experience transfer as a sectoral priority, whenever the projects were listed and categorized in the annual reports, no "transition cooperation" category was

5. In Hungarian: "...elfogadottá vált az a Magyar álláspont, amely a fejlesztéspolitika ágazati részének tekinti a rendszerváltozással kapcsolatos tapasztalatok megosztását, a tudás-transzfer gyakorlatát." Emphasis by the author.

used. An employee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in charge of the dossier also confirmed that the implemented projects with a transition element were indeed not compiled in a list.⁶ It should also be noted that project sectors only appeared in the 2010 and 2011 annual reports and their names were not consistent either. Therefore, due to the lack of clear categorization of projects, it is unfortunately not possible to provide an exact account on how and to what extent transition experience is incorporated into Hungary's IDC activities.

6. Interview with an employee of the MFA. Budapest. November 15, 2012.

In 2008, a new element appeared in Hungary's development cooperation with a separate budgetary line: support for democratic transition (MFA Hungary 2009, 13–14, 48). This was the first occasion when transition projects – even if only the ones focusing on democratization – received their own share within the overall development budget. The projects financed from this sum were listed separately, and it seemed that a good practice, which would allow for the delimitation of transition cooperation, started. However, next year allocations for the same program were cut completely, and support for democratic transition did not appear again as a separate budgetary line ever since.

4. Current issues of transition cooperation

In 2011, support for democratic transition re-appeared again in Hungary's IDC in reaction to the Arab Spring, but without a separate budgetary line. The collapse of certain North African regimes raised the issue of democracy promotion even higher on the EU's agenda, as well. Not only the countries historically interested in the region engaged themselves in the transforming countries (Tunisia, Egypt and Libya), but also the new member states took their share. The quick support and sympathy was most apparent in the Visegrad countries, since having gone through a political transition themselves two decades ago, they could identify with the situation. As his counterparts, Foreign Minister János Martonyi also visited the region multiple times throughout 2011 and 2012, and offered the Hungarian transition experience to the North African countries.

While the rising interest of the Visegrad Group and the growing support of the European Union provide a valuable opportunity for the countries to raise their development profile on the European level, it should be carefully considered how relevant the Central European experience can be in a culturally and historically completely different environment. While building democratic institutions, strengthening the respect for human rights and the rule of law are in general most desirable in Western eyes, Hungary should strongly consider relying on the expertise of its deployed diplomatic staff in the region to gain good knowledge about the context and to ensure the best usage of development aid and technical assistance.

In the context of the Arab Spring and due to the fact that the NMSs' transition experience is becoming an integral part of the EU's development cooperation policy, it is worth mentioning the Hungarian contribution to the European Transition Compendium. Since this document collects an important part of the experiences of NMSs, and this is where new, potential development partners can turn to for expertise, it is important to provide useful Hungarian contribution to it.

The ETC is mentioned in the MFA's annual report of 2009, when Adolfo Sanchez, the expert of the European Commission in charge of completing the Compendium, was on an official visit in Hungary. His task was to meet experts and officials having personal experience in the management of political, economic and social transition processes as well as the adoption of the *acquis communautaire* (MFA Hungary 2010, 19). Apart from this instance, the ETC is not mentioned in any other official document, despite that Hungary contributed quite significantly to the Compendium in four out of the six policy areas ('Agriculture, Land Market Reform and Environment Related Issues', 'Democracy, Human Rights and Political/Institutional Reforms', 'Economic Reforms – Transition to a Market-Based Economy', 'Human Development').

Despite the considerable contribution, there are certain shortcomings. It was possible to indicate in the ETC with whom the specific transition experience lays, and also to give contact details to those experts, who contributed to the specific issue areas. Concerning the Hungarian experience, we can rarely find the former, and the latter is often outdated. The contributors in most cases were governmental officials working in the given field and

presumably having first hand experience with the reforms.⁷ However, due to the public administration reforms that took place since the ETC was completed, certain ministries do not exist any longer in the form referred to in the Compendium. As a consequence, the contact person is often an official in a no longer existing ministry. This certainly puts obstacles in front of potential partner countries interested in the Hungarian experience. When inquired in the MFA about experiences with the ETC, the author was told that the MFA has never been approached based on the ETC, and the interviewee did not know of other instances when line ministries would have been approached by potential partners referring to the ETC.⁸ Hence, the potential of the Compendium seems to be untapped in the Hungarian case.

7. It is important to mention that apart from the official institutions, there were only a couple universities and one organization working also on development whose contacts were listed as sources of information on transition experience. The organization is the Budapest-based International Center for Democratic Transition (ICDT), the mission of which is sharing the experience concerning the democratic transition. However, this organization cannot be considered as an NGO in the conventional sense: governmental actors were active already in its establishment and several governments are also listed among its donors. Source: www.icdt.hu Although they are not mentioned in the ETC, there are several other NGOs as well that share some forms of transition experience, such as the European Centre for Not-for-Profit-Law (www.ecnl.org.hu) or the Foundation for Development of Democratic Rights (www.demnet.hu).

8. Interview with an employee of the MFA. Budapest. November 15, 2012.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The examination of official documents have shown that although some strategic thinking started to appear behind Hungary's development policy in certain limited areas, in general the policy works on an ad hoc basis. Hungary is committed to sharing its transition experience and did participate in regional awareness raising initiatives, like the Non-paper of 2011. Nonetheless, it does not have a clear documentation of its activities in the field of transition cooperation, the categorization of the projects is chaotic and only a very limited amount of information is available to the public. There is still no development strategy or legal framework in force, which would clarify the terms. The currently valid documents certainly do not fulfill this task. It would be of utmost importance to make it clear whether Hungary considers transition cooperation to be a sectoral priority or a holistic approach. While the MFA documents claim that the former is the case, practice suggests the latter.

As a mid-term development cooperation strategy is currently being developed in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, answering to these questions is absolutely timely. In the process of developing the strategy, the authorities have already consulted non-governmental organizations during 2012 to channel their thoughts into the process. If it did not happen yet, it would be certainly advisable to engage in consultations and knowledge-sharing with other new member states to see how they incorporated transition cooperation into their development strategies. The Visegrad Group would provide a perfect platform for this. Considering that all three Visegrad partners have already developed and launched their strategic frameworks, they have without doubt more experience in this field than Hungary. Concerning transition cooperation, there are at least two models Hungary could consider: the Czech, which narrows down transition cooperation to the field of political reforms (democratization and the strengthening of the civil society) and as a result seems to be closer to a sectoral approach, and the Slovak or the Polish case, which approach the issue in a more holistic way. Although the comparative analysis of the V4 countries' transition cooperations exceeded the limits of the present paper, it would be a useful exercise for the future.

Either approach the authorities choose, having a separate budget line for transition cooperation would make the implementation of the projects significantly more transparent. In this framework, regular calls for projects should be opened for the civil sector in order to engage them more effectively in transition cooperation. While democratic institutional reforms, market reforms and acquis adoption got a lot of attention in Hungary's development cooperation, strengthening civil society and capitalizing on the civil experiences of transition should get more consideration. Regular calls would also help the civil sector to plan ahead. Annual development plans, published before the start of the next year, would also serve this purpose.

In line with the EU's intentions to build on its already existing tools and instruments, Hungary needs to ensure that the data available in the on-line version of the ETC is up-to-date. It might even be a good idea to put the MFA in charge of the actualization and regular update of the Hungarian content of the ETC. The up-to-date database is both in the interest of potential partners and of Hungary.

When engaging itself in the countries of the Arab Spring, Hungary should base its cooperation on careful needs assessment on the field in order to find out in which areas expertise is needed, and whether the Hungarian experience can be relevant in these countries. Diplomatic missions as well as non-governmental organizations active in the region would prove essential partners in this process. Needs assessment along with the regular update of the ETC would facilitate matching supply with demand, which is essential to improve aid effectiveness.

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Transition Experience in the Official International Development Cooperation Policy of Hungary.

Layout: Toma Bóna

Produced by: DemNet Foundation

Apáczai Csere J. u. 1. Budapest, H-1052 Hungary

www.demnet.hu

This publication has been produced with the assistance of the European Union, EuropeAid Programme, in the frame of the “V4Aid – United Support for Millenium Development Goals” project.

The contents of this publication can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union.



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