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Policy Paper 3/2015

Between Opportunity and Threat:
V4 and the Aftermath of the Arab Spring

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Zora Hesová

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Summary

- Countries of the Visegrad Group (V4) have actively participated in the democratic assistance in Tunisia and Egypt since 2011. Motivated by the special asset of a recent transformation experience, Polish, Czech, Slovak and Hungarian governments have funded democracy assistance programs from 2011 to 2015. They have been directed at Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, and resulted in the establishment of the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) where Poland played a prominent role.
- After Libya disintegrated and Egypt reverted to authoritarianism, only Tunisia can count as a positive case of democracy assistance. Tunisia's robust civil society has intervened into the transition process and mitigated the effect of terrorism by upholding republican pluralism. The V4 assistance by Poland and Slovakia were part of the external efforts that contributed to the result.
- The strategies of the V4 countries have evolved with the slowing transition pace. They passed from direct government-to-government assistance to a transmission of a transition experience to a larger public, to finally concentrate on governance, pluralism and citizen participation issues. This shift of focus from transition towards governance and citizen participation were due to the absence of serious reforms in Egypt and to a lesser extent Tunisia and remains relevant up to date.
- The effectiveness of assistance programs in Egypt and Libya was hampered and eventually limited by security concerns and hostile legal environment, making it impossible to fund projects without large and longstanding, institutionalised programs. Tunisia, on the other hand, received substantive amounts of training, exchange and funding.
- Despite calls for V4 coordination towards the Mediterranean, no concertation among the V4 countries has developed. This has had at least two negative consequences. A clear stance on human rights issues was one of the most absent political instruments, weakening EU's soft power in ensuing media coverage of the crisis. V4 countries have missed an opportunity to promote a diplomatic agenda within the EU to which they otherwise ascribed.
- Secondly, a lacking coordination towards the Mediterranean results in change of public perception of the region. Former region of opportunity has turned into a region of threat. Warnings about a spill-over to Europe in case of unsuccessful transitions became a reality, exceeding the most pessimist expectations. The refugee crisis and the development of criminal smuggling networks reaching from Egypt and Turkey



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through the Balkans to the V4 countries represent an acute security threat and a peril for liberal order within the V4 countries themselves.

- A concertation and solidarity is needed more than ever: within European borders but especially outside them. Refugee camps, resettlement programs and policing are one side of the possible action, another aspect is governance quality assistance in Northern Mediterranean and diplomatic pressure on states that are yet to explode. Disastrous political and social policies in Tunisia but especially in Egypt – not to mention Libya, Jordan and Lebanon – represent acute if side-lined threats of more refugee waves and crime, to which the V4 countries are exposed.
- A clear understanding of further common threats and their social and political roots and coordination among the V4 is to be recommended.

Recommendations for V4

- To take a common V4 stance towards the current migration crisis in affirming the EU solidarity rather than resistance to EU resettlement programs. To advocate for solidarity with Hungary in particular.
- To coordinate a V4 approach to MENA with respect to further risk of even higher potential migration and radicalisation crisis. To coordinate in particular a better governance of refugee camps in Jordan and to focus on education, self-governance and support of EU resettlement programs prioritising Syrians.
- To contribute to the United Nations-managed Syria Strategic Response Plans.
- To evaluate the consequences of a recent failure of V4 coordination in MENA region and draft related lessons learned. To examine the V4 experience with MENA to perceive the current radicalisation and migration crisis in the context of failed reforms and ongoing poor quality of governance. To analyse and inform about the social roots of radicalisation in MENA.
- To draw on recent transition experiences to continue working on governance and citizen participation where possible (Tunisia, Jordan) and act in a coordinated manner through EU organizations in Egypt.



Rationale, programs and strategies of democracy assistance

The V4 countries recognized rather quickly that the unfolding of the Arab Spring opened up space for meaningful diplomatic and later for democracy assistance activity. Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia had quite recently made their own experiences of transitions from authoritarian regimes to democratic, market-based economies and are still in the process of ongoing legislative reforms. Moreover, they had also substantial experience with transition assistance in post-Soviet republics, the Balkans and even in Iraq after 2003. It was only logical to extend existing programs and create new ones directed to Egypt, Tunisia and later Libya.

The Visegrad countries had a significant institutional advantage in the very beginning of 2011: Hungary held the EU's rotating presidency during the first half of 2011 and Poland during its second half. Budapest and Warsaw used the opportunity to put the first three Arab countries to shed their dictatorships on the agenda as transition countries on par with Eastern Partnership states.

The **Hungary's** foreign minister János Martonyi travelled to Egypt several times, calling for EU assistance, lobbied the US and offered central European experience. One of the first V4 activities in the region were second track diplomacy meetings and an early seminar on V4 experiences in Cairo. More importantly, Hungary was active in reforming the Community of Democracies (CD), a coalition of countries committed to supporting democracy. CD members created a new tool, partnering groups called "Democracy Partnership Challenges" aiming at a direct transfer of experiences from developed countries to those in transition. Hungary promoted Tunisia and Tunisia was, along with Moldova, chosen to become the first recipient of the Democracy Partnership Challenge programs. Hungary called for a concerted activity on behalf of all V4 states. Since this was not heeded and the Hungarian presidency ended, Hungarian activity towards MENA weakened.

Poland also took an active role during its presidency. The Polish foreign minister Radosław Sikorski visited Tunisia, Egypt and Libya; he was the first EU's official to visit Benghazi. Poland became a member of a Contact Group on Libya, an assembly of foreign ministers, and nominated two ambassadors for positions within the European External Action Service to represent the EU on Arab matters, including Saudi Arabia.

Poland had decided early on to initiate a large assistance program for Tunisia together with extensive exchanges of civil servants and citizen activists from Tunisia to Poland and vice versa. It funded the assistance through its 30+ projects including an ambitious plan for an international institute supporting democratisation and modernisation of Tunisia. Poland



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allocated increasing funds to projects in Tunisia: from 38 000 EUR to 238 000 EUR in 2013.¹

The flagship initiative of the Polish EU Presidency in 2011 was the decision taken by the EU Council in December 2011 to create the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) of which Poland was one of the main proponents. It is inspired by the US National Endowment for Democracy (NED). Since it began operating in the second half of 2013 it has supported up to day some 200 projects, dozens of which in the MENA region – from Morocco to Jordan. The EED started to function as EU's general funding scheme to assist pro-democratic civil society organisations, young leaders, media and journalists, movements and individual activists working for pluralistic multi-party system. In Tunisia alone, the EED funded a dozen projects of worth some 350 000 EUR. Jerzy Pomianowski, a former Polish deputy foreign minister and a coordinator of the Polish Foreign Policy democratization agenda, was nominated the executive director of the EED and the MEP Andrzej Grzyb an EED board member. The V4 is represented by Slovakia's Pavol Demeš in its executive committee, a former foreign minister and a Central European Director of German Marshall Fund.

Slovakia followed the lead of Hungary during the Arab Spring outbreak and made choices similar to Poland. Foreign minister Mikuláš Dzurinda made the case for assistance on a trip to Egypt in June 2011 but later Slovakia opted to concentrate on Tunisia. Slovak foreign ministry issued a special call for proposals in May 2011 to SlovakAid, the official Slovak development agency. Throughout 2011 to 2014 Slovakia's CSOs worked on political education and citizen participation projects in various parts of Tunisia.

Slovakia also assumed the co-chairmanship of one of the new DPC Tunisia Task Forces, along with The Netherlands. 17 other EU countries took part in the Task Force, along with a number of international organisations which functioned as a platform where Tunisian government and CSOs outlined their priorities, particularly in the areas of citizen participation, media and political pluralism.

The Czech Republic started its involvement in the Arab Spring region by the official visit of the foreign minister Karel Schwarzenberg to Tunisia (May 2011), Libya (June 2011) and later to Egypt (March 2012). Unlike Poland and Tunisia, the Czech Republic focused on Egypt. The Czech foreign ministry added Egypt to the list of priority countries for its Transition Promotion Program and between 2011 and 2014 provided around more than

¹ Kinga Brudzińska. Support for NGOs in Tunisia after the Arab Spring. The Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), Bulletin No. 61 (656), 08. 05. 2014, https://www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=17211.



300 000 EUR in grants towards transformation, not counting humanitarian assistance.² A number of Czech NGOs generally active in similar programs in the Eastern Partnership countries led various projects starting with conferences about the transition process experience and moving towards capacity building of civil society and media in Cairo and in the provinces. The Czech embassy in Cairo hosted a V4 cultural event and participated in a V4 meeting about transformation. The Czech Republic also provided humanitarian assistance to Western Libya and to Syrian refugees in Jordan.

Evolving strategies of democracy assistance

When it comes to assessing the impact on the Arab Spring societies in transition, the V4 countries followed similar patterns. First efforts were made on the governmental level: foreign ministers travelled to at least some of the three transition countries, meet with officials and offered institutional support for transition processes on the level of ministries. It became quickly clear that the so called transitions were going to be much more complicated in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya than was the case in Central Europe in 1989. The old regimes did not collapse in the same way; the new transitional powers were not able to make any great decisions for their lack of legitimacy and a general absence of clear societal vision. Hence, no reform assistance was possible before the new parliaments were elected and before new constitutions were approved.

In the second phase the V4 countries, especially Poland and the Czech Republic, concentrated on transferring their transition experience to a larger public. Conferences were organised in Cairo and Tunis with V4 experts and former dissidents. Polish Lech Wałęsa and Czechoslovakia's former minister of interior Jan Ruml visited Tunisian trade unions and Egyptian NGOs specialised in security reform respectively. Opposition leaders in Tunisia and Egypt came to Poland for a study visit in September 2011 and delegates from Egypt, Tunisia and Libya observed the Polish parliamentary elections in October same year. Amr Hamzawy, a leader of Egypt's liberal opposition paid visit to Prague and Warsaw, as did the then Egyptian foreign minister Mohamed Kamel Abr. The Polish foreign ministry organised a training session SENSE, modelling a transition experience, for a group of Tunisians. Czech NGO leaders toured Egypt giving dozens of lectures and debates on the phases of the post-communist transitions to local activists, young politicians and union workers. Al Jazeera produced a documentary series devoted to the Polish transformation.

In late 2011 or early 2012 it became increasingly clear that the V4 asset, transferring transition experience, had outlived its utility: the crucial transition phase was of short

² Robin Shepherd, István Gyarmati, Zora Hesová, Patrycja Sasnal. What role for the Visegrad countries on the Mediterranean coast? Central European Policy Institute (CEPI), 05. 01. 2013, <http://www.cepolicy.org/publications/what-role-visegrad-countries-mediterranean-coast>.



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duration as the most consequential decisions were already made – authoritatively in Egypt and consensually in Tunisia.³ Tunisia was the only country where transition know-how could be really put to use. It took place during the first elections in 2011 to which a lot of foreign agencies participated through trainings and funding election observers and political education projects. After the elections in Tunisia and Egypt ended the initial phase of the transition, the second one was not to come. Important legislative and administrative reforms were postponed for the time after constitutions were adopted. This process lasted about two years in both countries. During this long period, Egypt's and Tunisia's Islamist governments stopped all reform agendas, concentrating on what were largely issues of identity politics and cultural conflicts between Islamist, liberals and radicals.

“Transformation” was not going to happen before those questions were solved and the authority of the state confirmed by the second round of elections. Hence, “transformation assistance” lost its rationale altogether: reforms were not the main focus of political parties; think tanks, NGOs, local citizen groups did not have an interlocutor in the state institutions and lost any short-term perspective on legislative or other systemic solution to social, ecological and urbanistic problems.

The last phase was hence concentrated on projects enhancing other, rather grass-rooted crucial aspects of democracy and governance: citizen participation, minority issues, gender issues, media quality and freedom and local governance.⁴ The V4 projects lost their exclusivity and took their place along with European countries and US agencies. Within this framework, only those projects that had enough long-term funding and a specialized focus or perspective, could be sustainable. Needless to say, programs funded by larger entities such as National Democratic Institute (NDI), UN Development Programme (UNDP), EED or specialised funds had more chances to survive.

³ Zora Hesová. Sdílení postkomunistického transformačního know-how: zkušenosti ze severní Afriky. Association for International Affairs (AMO), Briefing Paper 2/2012, 13. 02. 2012, <http://www.amo.cz/publikace/sdileni-postkomunistickeho-transformacniho-know-how-zkusenosti-ze-severni-afriky.html>.

⁴ Zora Hesová. Ohlédnutí za transformačními nadějemi arabského jara. Deník Referendum, 23. 11. 2014, <http://denikreferendum.cz/clanek/11974-ohljednuti-za-transformacnimi-nadejem>.



Operating conditions and effectiveness of V4 projects

The political reality of “transformation that was not happening” was a first limitation to the effectiveness of any V4 project; another was Tunisia’s overfunding and Egypt’s legislative obstructions. Slowly, V4’s added value as recent transformation countries acting on their own was clearly diminishing.

V4 countries had several structural disadvantages: they were not active in the region before 2011 and had little practical experience with MENA region. They had only limited funds of conjectural nature and no long-term institutionalised programs such as those from Scandinavia. German political foundations, French research institutes, Scandinavian foundations and US programs were all institutionally implanted in the region within much longer time frame and with larger scope of activities. Even so, V4 projects were able to make a difference, albeit in a limited time frame.

Tunisia is an outstanding example of a democracy promotion. Unlike in Egypt, there was almost no foreign funding before 2011. Very quickly, the openness of the transition period made a massive assistance possible. The reason was practical: the smaller and more homogenous country had better chances to succeed, hence spending money on Tunisia was considered as more effective and offered more visibility than Egypt. Above all, the transition authority had a similar structure to roundtables in Poland; it included all segments of society and made a series of liberal decisions such as maximally easing up the legal registration process for NGOs and their foreign funding.

Even after the new Islamist-led government came to power in 2012, no important restrictions for foreign funding were established. According to interviews with Tunisian activists,⁵ the Nahda government made sure foreign funding for CSOs was not hindered as long as Islamist CSOs could apply for funds and get a sizeable amount of them. Indeed, such a political deal could be tracked down in recipients’ lists and the US agencies ended up disbursing funds also to Islamist associations and charities.

The easiness of operations led to a quasi-saturation of the civil society. In 2013 there was hardly any small town without youth and media group with triple digit budget funded by a foreign agency, above all by US funds. Polish and Slovak NGOs concentrated on local governance, citizen participation and political education of youth. A number of youth leaders in Tunisia took part in political education seminars in Poland; Slovak NGOs have supported a local citizen network in el-Kef, assisted youth-led Transparency International Tunisia chapter and promoted micro-local ecology projects.

⁵ By the author of this paper in 2012 in Tunis.



While it is difficult to appreciate the impact of foreign assistance, it is a fact that in a few years Tunisia developed a vibrant citizen sector, an astonishing level of youth leadership and a plural civil society. Citizen pressure indeed played a decisive role during the years of crisis (2012 and 2013), blocking Islamist tendencies within the constitutional process, protesting violence and supporting a negotiated solution to the government crisis of 2013. It is possible to assume that foreign funding, expertise and international exchange did contribute to the flourishing of the civil society.

Egypt is quite another example. Egypt was more liberal than Tunisia before 2011 and human rights organisations and foreign foundations could operate in a gray zone. Yet Egypt did not embark upon an open-ended transition but was guided through the chaos of the years 2011 – 2013 by unilateral decisions of the army's political committee. Levels of violence were high; polarisation took precedence over national dialogue and political alliance building. Although, like in Tunisia, the population politicized very quickly and was eager for information and self-organisation, an unclear legal framework hindered any sustainability to new civic projects. Most registered as companies to avoid supervision by a hostile government or did not register at all, and hence were unable to receive foreign funding legally.

In the first two years of change, foreign funding increased openly, yet in 2012 the military government cracked down on major US and German foundations and later on foreign media. The instrumentalisation of nationalism created a sense of insecurity among civil society and finally in 2014 a very restrictive NGO law was enacted by the Sisi government (in absence of a parliament since 2012). Hence, many existing Egyptian grassroots organisations stopped operating. Also the foreign organizations were directly targeted. In 2012 a Slovak organisation was made understand that their presence in the Canal region was undesirable and left. In 2013 large German foundations stopped doing political education work, media activism and trade union support. In 2014 a number of foreign organisations – Czech, Swedish and Swiss among others – received threats. It became increasingly insecure to operate in Egypt without an understanding with the government, at least for the safety of Egyptian partners.

The 2011 – 2013 period was nevertheless typical for booming of civil society and media activism. Four Czech NGOs held seminars and workshops with Coptic, youth, anti-corruption and advocacy groups and launched their own media projects. Like in Tunisia before, the focus shifted from transition experience to capacity building and skills training for existing minorities, media and advocacy groups working on citizens' and youth participation, anti-corruption and media. A few years later most of the work went still due to security concerns and the impossibility to rely further on foreign funding. Hence, the great demand for learning and support could not be sustained by relatively small NGOs lacking legal and political guarantees.



Libya became inoperable already during 2013. The great wave of support directed at post-conflict Libya was quite quickly hindered by security reasons already in 2012 and became impossible from 2013 onwards. Poland engaged first in diplomatic support, the Czech Republic followed up with humanitarian aid and with limited capacity building for human rights NGOs.

Lack of coordination

The unpredictable political developments and legal hindrance highlight a complete lack of practical coordination on the EU level in general and among the V4 countries in particular. The lack of coordination had two consequences: a weakening of a general EU diplomacy in the region and a low effectiveness when it comes to exploiting a diplomatic asset.

An absolute lack of critical attitude on the EU level has costed the EU much of its soft-power in the MENA region, particularly in Egypt. Human rights abuses first by the army government, then by the Islamist government and finally by general Sisi's government in the aftermath of the coup made it effectively impossible for the EU to voice any critical stand. It has proven so incoherent and unsystematic that any later reaction, like questioning the events during the July 2013 coup and the August 2013 Rabaa massacre, were being perceived as a political, partisan stances and not positions of principle. The EU was silent too long and has paved the way to the abusive nationalism which made any larger democratic assistance in Egypt impossible. The V4 countries were present, advancing their transition projects in the ground, yet were incapable of exercising a common pressure on the EU to take stance in favour of guaranteeing the conditions of their work.

Further, the V4 countries have worked in all Arab Spring countries individually rather than collectively; apart from a conference and a film festival in Cairo in 2011 Visegrad was not promoted as a label. As consequence, a message about reform imperatives was diluted and same applied to the potential efficiency of all individual projects. As stated above, the initial transition processes in Tunisia and Egypt were different from the outset. Though, a similar trait was a lack of reform on the part of government and a lack of effort for pushing reform agendas by advocacy groups and political parties. They chose to oppose reform instead of working in cooperation with the state administration.

A common stance could have enhanced the message: there is a difference between individual countries describing their own experience with decentralisation and police reform, for example, and between a block of countries making those individual experiences into a systemic transformation trajectory. Particularly, the V4 has failed to mobilise its own common foreign policy instrument, the International Visegrad Fund. Apart from smaller



projects such as Tunisian and Egyptian study tours in the V4 countries, projects in MENA were not on the table.

Yet a common stance did not materialise. Early on, Hungary's EU presidency failed to gain support from other V4 countries to overcome their common lack of experience in MENA by a concerted action.⁶ Calls for a V4 coordination have not lacked, among others the CEPI policy brief from January 2013 suggested a creation of "V4 - Mediterranean group consisting of top aid and foreign policy officials from the four Visegrad countries", explored "the benefits of a collective approach" and coordinating "diplomatic activity in support of the 'Mediterranean Dialogue' in NATO and the OSCE's work in the region".⁷ Apart from democracy assistance, other projects have so far lacked a promotion of stability and mutual benefits by scholarships, official development aid, FDI and trade.

Region of threats

In 2013, it may have been too late. The developments in Egypt and in Syria have completely turned around the direction the Arab Spring was taking and have made a region of potential into a region of threats. The return of an unaccountable authoritarianism in Egypt, a total destruction of a 20 million country in Syria and the ensuing humanitarian and migration crisis have highlighted that security was one of the reasons for an engagement in the Mediterranean in the very beginning of 2011. Egypt and Tunisia were not supposed to fail unless Europe was going to face energy and migration crises.

In 2015, Tunisia is still moving forward albeit very slowly while Egypt has completely failed the democratic experiment. From a security point of view, the old new authoritarian state may seem stable but it is not efficient in a long term. The Egyptian state has reverted on migration policy and its legal framework for migration pushes the hundred of thousands of Syrian refugees in Egypt across the sea. Egypt's incapacity for economic reforms may soon push more hundreds of thousands of its own citizens to seek survival in Europe. More importantly, as already mentioned, the cost of "stability" is marginalisation and radicalisation of its Sinai fringe without the ability of containing, let alone solving the uprising.

In July 2013 the first Polish citizen fell victim to an ISIS franchise in Egypt after being kidnapped from Cairo; a Czech citizen was most probably abducted by the ISIS in Libya. Even Tunisia is not successful from security point of view. The former Islamist and the new

⁶ Robin Shepherd, István Gyarmati, Zora Hesová, Patrycja Sasnal. What role for the Visegrad countries on the Mediterranean coast? Central European Policy Institute (CEPI), 05. 01. 2013, <http://www.cepolicy.org/publications/what-role-visegrad-countries-mediterranean-coast>.

⁷ Ibid.



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Nidaa governments were not able to satisfy, not even symbolically, the popular demand for social justice. In a volatile environment on the margins of Sahel, such a failure has led to radicalisation within Tunisia itself.

Hence, it remains imperative to coordinate diplomatic pressure and assistance to both Egypt and Tunisia on accounts of governance quality, economic development and police cooperation. The third strategy directed at governance and citizen participation remains a crucial part of foreign policy strategy. Even if the democratic “success” in Tunisia and “failure” in Egypt may lower the motivation for expansive foreign policy programs, the EU in general and V4 countries in particular should be aware of the risks of inaction.

Egypt and the EU are in a similar situation today like they were in 2011. First, being silent in face of blatant human rights abuses condones a government producing motives for radicalisation of its own population. Secondly, it takes away credit from any further reaction when abuses will become even more impossible to gloss over. Thirdly, looking away from the next humanitarian and refugee crisis in the making will not pay off. Egypt’s demographic explosion and the ongoing radicalisation under the effect of a cold civil war on Islamism are being exacerbated by the deterioration of living conditions in Egypt due to poverty, global warming and sea levels rising. Large parts of Egypt’s 90 million population live in the Delta region just above The Mediterranean Sea with inlets of freshwater in danger of immanent salinisation in case of even a limited rising of the Mediterranean waters. An ineffective, unreformed state is as dangerous as the one that deliberately throws parts of the population into extremism, counting on producing a patriotic reflex on the end.

As of summer 2015 the first repercussion of the worst humanitarian crisis of this century are slowly being felt at the South-Eastern borders of the EU – which is incidentally also a V4 border. The EU and V4 are largely ignoring the seriousness of the migration crisis, partly due to the fact that they do not see it in a larger context of transition failure in most of the MENA countries.



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