**Central and Eastern European transition experience in EU development policy**

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The ability of member states to exert influence on EU policy making has received much scholarly attention in several policy areas. This paper looks at the influence of the Central and Eastern European (CEE) member states on the EU’s international development policy. Specifically, it examines how successful these states have been in uploading their experience gained from reforming their economies and polities gathered during the transition process, into the EU’s development policy. While there is evidence of successful uploading, this is mainly on the rhetorical level, and there is little to show in practice. The paper argues that this is due to a number of reasons, including the low salience of development policy in the CEE countries, the inability of these states to muster allies and their low capacities. More importantly however the CEE states have failed to convince the older members that incorporating their transition experience into the common development policy is in the Community interest, and many see it as a threat to the poverty reduction agenda of policy area.

*Keywords:* EU decision making, Central and Eastern Europe, influence, development policy, transition experience

**1. Introduction**

Processes of post-enlargement intergovernmental decision making in the Council of the European Union have received much attention in the scholarly literature, especially concerning the role of the new member states (Arregui and Thomson 2009; Thomson 2009; Copsey and Pomorska 2010; Plechanovová 2011; Copeland 2014). Gaining knowledge on how member states interact with each other in these processes, how they argue their positions and how these processes change (socialize) member state officials and ultimately member states themselves are important for understanding how the EU works. Two-way dynamic processes are at play in the Council: the resulting rules, principles and interactions change the behaviour (and perhaps even identities) of member states, but also member states attempt to exert influence on EU policies, and project their own policy preferences to the Community level. Terminology associated with the literature on Europeanization captures these dynamics well, as it talks about ‘downloading’ from the EU level and ‘uploading’ to it. The Council, including its preparatory committees (COREPER I and II) and network of thematic working groups offers a rich terrain for studying the influence of the EU on member states, and the influence that various countries have on EU outcomes.

The impact of the EU, as well as the impact of member states on the Community has been especially interesting in case of the Central and Eastern European (CEE) member states which joined in 2004 and 2007. There is clear evidence that the EU has had significant impacts on these countries in terms of Europeanizing their political systems and various policies (see Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005). But how much influence have the CEE countries been able to exert, and how have various EU policies changed due to enlargement? A number of factors may have predestined the CEE countries to relatively low influence for some time: they were new to the ‘Brussels game’ and had to learn the ropes, as well as build their confidence and administrative capacities for effective participation. They are (with the exception of Poland) relatively small and mid-size countries, which weakens their chances of exerting significant influence on policy outcomes unless they form coalitions.

This paper examines the case of CEE influence (focusing primarily on the Visegrád states of Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) on the EU’s international development policy. This case of potential ‘uploading’ is interesting as in general, development policy is a low salience issue for the V4 member states. However, they have unanimously expressed a strong desire to alter the policy and make it build more on their ‘transition experience’. Sharing experience from their political and economic transition and EU integration processes with developing countries has emerged as the major ‘added value’ of the V4 countries in international development, and indeed it has even become the main constituting narrative of their donorship. They have, in a rather unified manner, pushed the EU to make greater use of their transition experience in its common development policy, and also its related external policies. Undoubtedly, the CEE countries have had some degree of success in uploading their preference for transition experience to the EU’s development policy agenda, as evidenced most vividly by Council’s recent endorsement of a Commission communication on Support for Sustainable Change in Transition Societies (European Commission 2012). However, while sharing transition experience with developing countries has clearly entered the EU’s rhetoric and strategy, the CEE countries seem to feel that there is still not much to show in terms of practical results.

This paper therefore seeks to explain why the V4 member states have not been able to achieve more in terms of influencing the common development policy. It argues that weak influence stems from several factors, including limited skills in building alliances and low administrative capacities, but more importantly the low salience of development policy for the V4 countries and the fact that they have failed convince the other member states that integrating transition experience into the EU’s development policy is actually in the Community interest. Thus, transition experience tends to be seen as ‘the thing of the V4 countries’ and also as a potential threat to current configuration of EU development policy in terms of aid allocation and aid effectiveness.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature on uploading and member state influence in the Council and presents the framework of the paper. Section 3 discusses the transition experience of the V4 member states and argues that it has emerged as a constituting narrative for V4 development policies. The following section then illustrates the results that the V4 countries have achieved in uploading this issue, and Section 5 explains why these results have been rather limited. Section 6 concludes the paper.

**2. Power, influence and uploading policy preferences**

Europeanization is often characterized as a two way dynamic process: policies of member states are not only influenced by the European level, but member states also attempt to project their own policy preferences on the Community’s agenda (Börzel 2002). This latter issue ties in with the literature on member state power and influence in decision making in the EU Council and the specific literature on the influence of CEE member states on various EU policies (Dangerfield 2009; Copsey and Pomorska 2010; Rybář 201). Thus far very little has been written on development policy. Interestingly, most of the research investigating the interplay between CEE international development policies and the EU’s development policy has tended to focus exclusively on downloading, and conceptualized the EU *acquis* as an unchanging source of influence on member states (Horký 2012a; Lightfoot and Szent-Iványi 2014). These papers argue that while the EU played some role in restarting international development policies in the CEE countries after the turn of the Millennium, it has had little impact since in terms of approximating the practices on these countries to the principles embodied in the *acquis*. Horký (2012a) has termed the resulting configuration ‘shallow’ Europeanization, while Lightfoot and Szent-Iványi (2014) talk about the ‘reluctance’ the new donors have shown in Europeanizing their international development policies.

The influence of the CEE states on EU development policy has received very little attention. We situate development policy within the broad context of EU external relations, where there have been a few studies (see Bilčík 2010; Marton 2012; Baun and Marek 2013). The paper defines influence as ‘the modification of one or several actors’ behaviour, beliefs or preferences by acts of another actor exerted for the purpose of reaching the latter actor’s aims’ (Schunz 2010). The literature on member state power and influence has produced a long list of variables that make influence from a member state more likely. We adapt the framework used by Copsey and Pomorska (2010) to understand the influence of Poland in the case of the EU’s Eastern policy. This framework is suitable for this paper for several reasons. For one, it is synthesis itself of previous approaches to understanding member state influence. Second, it was specifically developed to understand the influence of a CEE new member state in external relations policies. As we focus on the V4 states *as a group*, we adopt the following five of the variable factors identified by Copsey and Pomorska[[2]](#footnote-2):

* *Intensity of policy preferences.* What weight do the new member states place on international development policy?
* *Skills at alliance building and bargaining.* The ability of a member state (or a group of member states) to rally others to support their preferred policy option.
* *Capacities*, including the availability of skilful diplomats, a clear policy position and instructions from the capital.
* The ability to argue that a given policy proposal is actually in the *Community interest*, and not just an attempt to upload national interests.
* *Receptiveness* of other member states, which depends primarily on their own policy preferences in the area.

As the main source of data, the paper relies on 31 interviews carried out between 2008 and 2013 with development diplomats at the permanent representations to the EU and in the national capitals, from both old and CEE member states. Decisions of the EU’s development policy are formally made by the Council, but issues are usually already decided in the Council Working Group on Development (CODEV), which prepares the development-related agenda of the Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER). Thus, the technical expertise and negotiating capacities of the NMS are mainly important in the CODEV setting. A number of EU officials from the European Commission (EC), the Council Secretariat and the European External Action Service were also interviewed. Due to reasons of confidentiality, the interviewees remain anonymous. Other data sources included official and legal documents from the V4 countries on development strategies, as well as evaluations carried out by the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC) and national watchdog NGOs.

**3. Transition experience – narrative, importance and problems**

The V4 countries have been placing a large rhetorical emphasis on their ‘comparative advantage’ in international development policy, as compared to other donors. The European Union has been increasingly pushing donors to specialize in the name of concepts like the complementarity and the division of labour (European Commission 2007). Seemingly, no other EU donors have taken this more seriously than the V4 states. There is a sense that the V4 countries need to justify their added value as donors, especially since they have much less experience in dealing with developing countries than the more established donors. For many states, their size restricts their ability to contribute to all areas of development and thus they are looking ‘for a niche’ where they ‘could make a specialised and visible imprint on the EU policies’ (Najšlová 2013).

The narrative of transition experience most likely arose from these needs. According to this narrative, the V4 countries have undergone a spectacular and generally successful process of transition between 1989 and 2004: (1) transition from authoritarian political regimes to full-fledged democracies; (2) transition from centrally planned economies to market economies; and (3) integration of these new polities and economies into the structures of the European Union. This process of transformation and integration required the countries to undertake reforms in basically all areas of economic, social and political life, including the organization of free and fair elections, the construction of checks and balances, judicial reform, macroeconomic stabilization, liberalization, the privatization of state assets, and the adoption of the EU *acquis*. Some reforms were more successful than others, and different countries experimented with different solutions (Soós 2011). Regardless of the methods chosen, the V4 countries have generally been successful in realigning their polities and economies, which was acknowledged by the West through admission to the EU.

During this 15 year reform process, the V4 countries argue that they have accumulated a vast amount of knowledge on how to carry out reforms and how to approximate national legislation to the *acquis*. This huge body of knowledge has been termed ‘transition experience’, and it seemed a viable candidate for a source of added value in international development for two reasons: first, it was rather unique to the region in a sense that the rapid transformation and integration of V4 had been unprecedented historically, and second, because a large number of less developed countries, mainly in the EU’s Eastern and Southern neighbourhood, were also coping with political and economic transformation processes of their own, in most cases perhaps less successfully than the V4 countries. According to the narrative, sharing V4 transition experience with these regions can assist their reform processes and can catalyze their approximation to and association with the EU, whatever form it would eventually take.

This narrative has been strongly present in policy and other documents relating to international development policy in all CEE countries, both published by the state and NGOs. However, it is most explicit amongst the V4 states. The Czech Republic’s Development Cooperation Strategy for 2010-2017 for example states that

[t]he Czech Republic has a comparative advantage over most of the established donor countries – its experience of a process of political, economic and social transformation. It seeks to capitalize on this advantage in cooperation with countries undergoing similar changes, and in countries where the democratic process has not been initiated. (Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2010: 19)

Very similar wordings can be found in earlier documents as well from other countries, such as Slovakia’s National Programme of Official Development Assistance for 2003:

Slovakia make[s] maximum use of its comparative advantage over EU donors, which is the unique experience from the intricate transition from communism to democracy and the related reform process. (Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2003: 1)

Hungary’s International Development Policy Strategy for 2014-2020 makes institutional development one of the three main priority sectors where Hungary supports its partners. This includes ‘strengthening democratic rule of law; transferring transition and integration experience, good governance, developing state, local and sectoral institutions, capacity building and supporting civil society’ (Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014: 19). According to Poland’s Multiannual Development Cooperation Programme for 2012-2015,

[t]he last twenty years of Poland’s history provide a good example of a country and society that has made a successful transition from an authoritarian regime and a centrally planned economy to democracy and a free market. This experience could be of special interest for countries that start from a similar position and are eager to learn how to carry out reforms in nearly all fields of government. Polish experts can also share knowledge on how to manage the transformation process itself. (Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2012: 7)

These and other examples clearly illustrate the importance that the V4 countries place on transition experience. Most of them have even created dedicated programs or organizations to manage this transfer and make transition experience a more visible component in their international development policies (Végh 2012) by providing grants to national actors to engage in international experience sharing projects. In the cases of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, these are dedicated programs under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), the Transition Promotion Programme in the former and the Transformation Experience Sharing Programme in the latter. In 2011 the Polish government created the International Solidarity Fund, acting as a re-granting agency aimed to support democracy promotion projects abroad. In Hungary, a government sponsored but independent non-profit organization, the International Centre for Democratic Transition ‘collects the experiences of recent democratic transitions and shares them with those who are determined to follow that same path’ (ICDT 2014).

Transition experience therefore, due to its nature, seems best suited to support the external democracy promotion components of V4 international development policies. Perhaps Poland has gone the farthest in conceptualizing transition experience as a tool of democracy promotion, as it is the country which has most profoundly placed its entire international development policy on the principle of promoting democracy abroad.[[3]](#footnote-3) Some of the other excerpts above however seem to indicate that V4 countries see spreading transition experience as an end in itself, without necessarily having any clear goal in mind other than referring to transition experience as a way of differentiating themselves from the established donors. Emphasizing transition experience may simply be a way of constructing a unique donor identity as opposed both to the ‘traditional’ Western donors, but also the ‘emerging donors’ like China or Brazil. Transition experience allows the V4 countries to justify their presence and niche in the international development system: they are not simply new donors with little money, adding to the existing problems of fragmentation in the system, but they can share a unique experience which can be highly valuable for developing countries.

But, there are several problems related to the transition experience narrative and its usage as a basis for justifying international development activities, which have been increasingly addressed in the literature (Dabrowski 2012; Horký 2012b; Szent-Iványi 2014). These problems are both conceptual and practical in nature. A detailed discussion of these is beyond the scope of the paper, but they are briefly presented. Conceptual problems relate to the transferability and relevance of V4 transition experience in developing country contexts. Are the problems faced by societies in transition today (such as ones in the EU’s Eastern and Southern neighbourhood, or even beyond) similar to the ones the CEE countries faced between 1989 and 2004? While answering this question would require a detailed investigation beyond the scope of this paper, contexts and issues are clearly highly different, as shown by a brief comparison by Dabrowski (2012) between the geopolitical and socio-economic context of the 2011 Arab revolutions and that of the former Soviet bloc countries more than twenty years ago. One may therefore rightly be sceptical about how relevant V4 transition experience actually is.

A second (and related conceptual issue) is *what* transition experience actually is. As mentioned, reforms in the V4 countries basically impacted all areas of life, making transition experience potentially an extremely broad term. Poland for example mentions, among other things, issues like developing small and medium enterprises, agricultural and rural development, counteracting environmental degradation, climate change mitigation and adaptation, and building modern information management systems as parts of its transition experience (Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2012: 7). While the transition and integration process clearly impacted all these sectors, has it really informed sectoral know-how to the extent to make Poland’s expertise unique? Other V4 countries do not seem to detail the content of their transition experience as much as Poland does, and mainly imply that transition experience refers to sharing expertise between various actors (official and non-state) on reform processes. None the less, it seems that if a country wants, it can argue that any knowledge transfer project that it undertakes with its partners is related to transition experience.

Practical problems also raise several questions. First, transferring transition experience requires an international development policy that is based heavily on technical cooperation tied to procurement from donor country actors, and is thus highly supply driven, allowing little scope for national ownership and alignment. This goes against internationally agreed principles in development policy such as those embodied in the 2005 Paris Declaration. Second, how can MFAs in charge of international development policy actually harness transition experience, which exists in a decentralized manner in several different government agencies, NGOs and individual experts? How can those who possess transition experience, are engaged in their day-to-day work and may not even think of their knowledge as transferable to others be engaged in development cooperation? And, more broadly, how will the MFA gather information on ‘who knows what’?

Despite these conceptual and practical difficulties, the V4 countries have not only made transition experience a part of their bilateral development policies, but have also made clear attempts to make it visible on the EU level as well. We turn to examining these efforts next.

**4. There is some evidence of successful uploading…**

Given the importance of transition experience in national rhetoric, and the role it plays in creating donor identities, it is reasonable to expect that the V4 countries will attempt to represent it on the European level as well. There is evidence that transition experience has entered EU level discourses. All V4 development experts representing their countries in CODEV argued during the interviews how important this experience is and how they attempt to ‘represent’ it on the EU level. All EC, EEAS and Council officials interviewed also seemed highly knowledgeable about the importance the V4 countries attach to transition experience. The question is, have the V4 countries managed to achieve any results in making EU level policies reflect this.

Some tangible results are clearly visible. The first clear result was a short reference to new member state transition experience in the 2006 European Consensus for Development, a joint policy statement by the Council, the Parliament and the EC which provides a strategic framework for the EU’s development policy. Article 33 states that ‘the EU will capitalise on new Member States’ experience (such as transition management) and help strengthen the role of these countries as new donors.’ Even though the European Consensus can only be seen as soft law, this article gave the V4 countries a basis for lobbying the EU institutions to elaborate the details on exactly how the EU will use transition experience.

Operationalization of the Article 33 led to the second main tangible result. The EC saw the main obstacle to making greater use of transition experience in the ‘who knows what’ problem.[[4]](#footnote-4) Before the EU could systematically capitalise on transition experience, it needed to know what this exactly was and which national level actors possess it. The V4 countries were therefore asked to collect this information and report it to the EC, which resulted in the publication of the European Transition Compendium (ETC) in 2011 (see Sanchez 2010). The Compendium is basically a collection of projects, best practices, and actor profiles from the V4 countries which may represent transition experience, and could be of relevance in international development. The ETC was published both as a lengthy document, but also as a searchable online database, with the intention of allowing for future additions and making the ETC a ‘living’ project. However, the project seems to have been ‘dead on arrival’. The initial content of the database was based on what the V4 countries themselves collected and reported to the Commission as transition experience. Some countries seem to have been more ambitious in this than others. Hungary for example only reported 7 projects, while Estonia added 30 projects, leading to about 300+ projects in total. It is curious why the V4 countries did not put a larger effort into collecting their transition experience, when they advocated the issue themselves. Regular checks on the ETC database also reveal that the planned regular updates are not really happening, and the list of projects included has only marginally increased compared to the initial version. The failure of the ETC is implicitly acknowledged by the Commission (European Commission 2012: 16) as it calls for a ‘broader platform’ for knowledge sharing, and has recently been favouring another portal, capacity4dev.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Clearly the V4 countries were not satisfied with the way the EC was operationalizing transition experience, and eight of them (with Poland and Bulgaria missing) presented a short non-paper in 2011 in which they called on the EC to ‘consider how to systematically employ transition experience in EU external action’ (Non-paper 2011). More specifically, it also called on maximizing the potential of financial instruments to use transition experience, and explicitly mentions earmarking funds dedicated to transition cooperation under the thematic programs of the EU’s Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI). This clearly revealed the financial interest that new member states have in uploading transition experience to the EU level, as earmarking would allow their national actors easier access to EU funding for development projects.

The third tangible result relates to a Commission communication, heavily supported by the V4 countries[[6]](#footnote-6) and endorsed by the Council in early 2013, entitled *Support for Sustainable Change in Transition Societies* (European Commission 2012). The goal of the communication is to ‘examine what the EU has to offer to help countries in transition achieve successful and sustainable transformations, building on its own experiences’ (European Commission 2012: 3). The communication was driven mainly by external factors, i.e. democratizations and transitions happening in the EU’s neighbourhood (primarily the Arab Spring) which raised a need for the EU to formulate a coherent way in responding to such events. The communication again clearly refers to transition experience (‘make efficient use of knowledge-sharing and capacity development methods, including the use of transition experience of EU Member States, European Commission 2012: 5), and it also cites several examples of successful (and potentially transferable) reforms in the V4 member states. More importantly however, the document stresses that transition processes should be recipient country driven, implying that it’s the recipient that should request assistance, and not the EU offer it. While this is desirable from a development effectiveness perspective, it also takes off some of the pressure that the EC faces from the V4 countries in terms of operationalizing transition experience: it is now up to the partners under transition to request a transfer of experience. This wording definitely weakens the position of the V4 countries in calling on the EU to do more.

Concerning the practical side of using transition experience, the earmarking of EU funds has not happened. Szent-Iványi (2014) has shown that actors (mainly NGOs, but also government agencies) from the V4 member states do rather poorly in winning EU financed international development related grants and contracts in the Eastern Neighbourhood countries, where V4 transition experience can be most relevant.[[7]](#footnote-7) Zázvorkova (2011) finds most of the EU funding that these actors do win is actually given for domestic development education and awareness raising projects, which does not entail any international transfer of transition experience. Earmarking DCI or other funds may thus be seen by the V4 countries as a way of increasing their opportunities to win EU grants.

Based on the above, we argue that transition experience has only entered the EU’s development policy on a rhetorical level, and has not strongly informed the Commission’s development practice. As evidenced by the 2011 non-paper, and the lack of any substantial developments since, V4 countries clearly feel that the EU is not doing enough in ‘mainstreaming’ their transition experience into the Community’s development policy. The following section examines the explanations for the relative weakness of the V4 states in uploading their policy preferences onto the EU.

**5. But why only limited success?**

There are a number of factors which can explain why the V4 countries have not had as much influence on EU development policy as hoped. We present these below, along the lines of the framework elaborated in Section 2.

***Intensity of policy preferences***

As shown above, transition experience can be seen as the constituting narrative of development policies in the V4 countries. None the less, development policy itself cannot be by any means seen as a priority policy area for the V4 countries. The V4 countries are relatively newcomers to the field of development policy. While they did have experience in international cooperation with developing countries during the Communist-era, these policies were terminated after 1989. Most observers agree that it was EU accession conditionality which made these countries restart international development, although with a highly different face than their pre-1989 policies. Also while in rhetoric the V4 countries accept all the norms and principles of the OECD DAC style Western international development system, in practice they are often far from actually implementing them (see [Horký-Hlucháň](http://www.routledge.com/books/search/author/ondej_horky_hlucha/) and Lightfoot 2012). The low salience of development policy can be explained by the fact there generally the domestic constituencies for giving aid are rather weak in the V4 countries. National NGOs are weak and lack capacities, and public opinion is also less supportive as in the case of the more established donors.

This is reflected in the way these countries participate in the work of CODEV. An official from the EEAS noted that the V4 states ‘tend to be on the quieter side, while representatives from the UK or France tend to talk a lot’.[[8]](#footnote-8) Some V4 diplomats clearly felt that they are treated as outsiders in the policy area by both the older members and the EC. As stated by a diplomat: ‘We have little to contribute to this policy area’.[[9]](#footnote-9) Thus, we have an interesting situation: the V4 countries seem to have a strong preference (mainstreaming transition experience), in a low salience policy area, which may indicate that member state policy specialists will do all they can, but will receive little support from their national governments.

***Skills at alliance building and bargaining***

Copeland (2013: 483-4) argues that the new member states are still grappling with the complexities of being successful negotiators, although they are aware of this and are attempting to improve their position. However, he argues that they remain junior partners within the broader European integration process and their best hope of improving this situation would be to form stronger links with the large/richer member states. In the field of external relations broadly defined, there are few examples of successful coalition building. A pertinent example of this is the alliance built by Poland with Sweden to push ahead with the Eastern Partnership. Part of the success can be attributed to the fact that Sweden is seen as an effective EU player and that the policy was pitched as an EU preference, something we discuss below (Kaminska 2013: 31). However, given the topic under discussion it is perhaps surprising that the V4 is a less than effective grouping than its membership suggests (Dangerfield 2009). However, more recent research (Törő *et al*. 2014) highlights that the Visegrád states are learning the lessons of the past ten years of membership and as a result the group has the potential to become a more effective sub-regional grouping within the EU. Onderco’s (2014) study of V4 voting in UN suggests a large degree of foreign policy coherence and that it may just be that the V4 states have taken time to learn how to play the Brussels game.

There is evidence that the V4 states work together in CODEV. The V4 countries have agreed to coordinate their development policy priorities vis-à-vis the EU institutions.[[10]](#footnote-10) More broadly, the CODEV diplomats of the member states joining after 2004 have regular weekly breakfast meetings with a representative of the EC.[[11]](#footnote-11) External observers see the V4 countries as presenting a rather unified front when it comes to transition experience.[[12]](#footnote-12) However, there is evidence of occasional break downs in this unified front, such as the failure to get Poland (and Bulgaria) to endorse the 2011 non-paper. The V4 countries also seem to fail when it comes to building alliances with the older member states, something which was crucial in the success of the Eastern Partnership.

***Capacities***

The V4 states generally have more limited capacities in relation to personnel and expertise than many of the older member states. An analysis of total staffing levels generally in relation to development highlight the weaknesses with staff levels ranging from 52 in Poland to 11 in Hungary (CRPE 2013). To put this into context, Luxembourg co-operation was seen to be ‘sparsely staffed’ by a DAC peer review team with 42 employees in the MFA and 54 in LuxDev, the agency (OECD 2012: 61). This general lack of capacity is compounded by the fact that CODEV reps from the V4 states often lack a strong background in development due to their status as career diplomats. This also means that they are subject to a policy of staff rotation. MFAs have little staff capacities and they rarely give detailed instructions to CODEV diplomats, who are often new to post and learning the rules of the game (Bilčík 2010). One official complained that they ‘struggle a lot for feedback’.[[13]](#footnote-13) The relative under representation of V4 officials within the EU institutions does not help in this regard (Bilčík 2010). There is also an unwillingness to ask for advice from other member states or the EU institutions and to not avail themselves of the networking opportunities open to CODEV officials (Lightfoot and Szent-Iványi 2014).

None the less, institutional memory is improving, as it was noted that ‘every new [V4] representative [in CODEV] is a bit better than the previous one was when (s)he had been new’, in a sense that they have better understandings of development issues and more knowledge on how development policy works (see Lightfoot and Szent-Iványi 2014). In relation to staff, rotation may be perceived to be a good thing given the low status of development within the career structure of the MFA. There is a clear sense from the informal DAC peer reviews that development is not seen as a great career move. In relation to the specific issue of transition experience, there are specific problems. For example, the Czech government has yet to find a mechanism to reward the extra work carried about by experts (Němečková *et al.* 2012: 40).Indeed, when a ‘transition expert’ has gained recognition internationally, it may well happen that (s)he is wooed away by a different donor with more generous funding (Konrad forthcoming). The idea of building up a ‘living pool of expertise’ has yet to really take off (Czech Government 2011: 1).

***The ability to argue for Community interest***

We do not go into the issue of whether mainstreaming transition experience in development policy is a community interest or not, rather we focus on how much the V4 countries have managed to sell it as such. There is a recognition that transition experience is the main comparative advantage of the new donors, but there is a perception that V4 states focus too much on this issue at the expense of others, a Council official interviewed even argued that they are ‘obsessed’ with transition experience.[[14]](#footnote-14) For example, at a recent meeting of the so-called “like-minded states” in the Netherlands, Poland said nothing until the end when they mentioned transition experience.[[15]](#footnote-15) This does reinforce perceptions on how transition experience is a thing of the V4 countries.

None the less, there are clear efforts to portray transition experience as something that would benefit the Community. For example, in a speech in 2013, Czech Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Jiří Schneider, argued that

We are ready to share with developing countries our wealth of past experience with privatisation and building of business environment. We can help create strategies for public administration reform, private sector development, new forms of public private partnership, democratic governance, institutionalisation and a fair judiciary’. (Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013)

This quote is an example of efforts to link up transition experience with the global development architecture, something of key importance to the EU. The broad content of transition experience however questions just how credible these statements can be. The V4 countries have problems in delimiting what is transition experience – it seems that they treat the issue as broad as possible to suit their convenience. But, how can something be integrated into EU policies if its exact content is unknown?

Becoming more specific however also raises problems. One clear area of transition experience is the expertise gained while joining the EU. Here the current accession countries seek mostly the experience with incorporating EU rules. The EU candidates and potential candidates often coincide with priority countries of many V4 donor, though, have simultaneously access to EU pre-accession financing, TAIEX, and twinning. In the framework of these they can apply for projects with similar focus or expertise as the ‘transition experience’ ones, but backed up with far larger budgets.

***Receptiveness of other member states***

Many old member states (such as France and the UK) have strong preferences due to political, historical and economic reasons for giving aid to Sub-Saharan Africa (or, more broadly, the African, Caribbean and Pacific [ACP] countries) , and would like to see the region remain the main recipient of EC aid (Carbone 2007). In rhetorical terms, this can be justified with the EU’s goal to reduce global poverty, which implies giving aid to countries where poverty is high. Transition experience is not seen as relevant in least developed Sub-Saharan African countries, and is thus understood as a threat to poverty-focused aid. V4 countries however have argued that the ACP group is a heritage of the colonial past, and the EU should focus equally on regions where the new members have a comparative advantage, such as the Balkans.[[16]](#footnote-16) This clearly does not resonate with many influential older member states

Other worries for some older member states relate to how mainstreaming transition experience will influence the quality and effectiveness of EC aid. There are fears that this can decrease recipient ownership and lead to more donor-driven technical cooperation. Earmarking funds implies tied aid, i.e. procurement from the V4 countries, which creates a certain monopoly for them (and would also mean fewer funds available to actors from the older members). Recipient countries clearly need advice in carrying out reforms, and while no one doubts that the CEE countries can have good insights to offer, there are questions related to how well these fit with local contexts. Restricting the pool of expertise on offer to developing countries to V4 transition experience can therefore lead to inefficient solutions. In short, what the V4 countries would like to achieve seems to embody bad aid practices and goes against many principles embodied in the European Consensus.

**6. Conclusions**

This paper has examined how the V4 member states have influenced the agenda of the EU’s development policy, using the case study of transition experience. While there is evidence of successful policy uploading and transition experience has entered EU rhetoric, there is little to show in practical terms. V4 countries clearly want to see a stronger mainstreaming of transition experience into the EU’s external development programs and earmarked funds in order to ensure greater success for their national development actors in EU grant and contract tenders. We explain this relative lack of success using five variables which can be seen to determine the power and influence of member states in EU decision making. The results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Determinants of V4 influence in uploading transition experience

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Intensity of policy preferences** | Preference for uploading transition experience is high, but development policy in general is a low salience issue for V4 governments. |
| **Skills at alliance building and bargaining** | In general, a gradual improvement is visible. But, alliances only among themselves, they have failed to muster support from older members states and civil society. |
| **Capacities** | Low staff levels, career diplomats, frequent rotation, low prestige of development within MFAs, and lack of instructions from capitals. |
| **The ability to argue for Community interest** | Attempts made, but not convincing; transition experience is vague in content and is seen as ‘the thing of the V4 countries’. |
| **Receptiveness of other member states** | Low, transition experience is seen as a threat to the status quo of EU’s common development policy. |

Source: authors

There is a clear sense that transition experience at a broad level is a comparative advantage of the V4 countries in international development. However, the V4 states generally ascribe relatively low weight to development policy. While there are some variations between them, arguably the intensity of preferences in low in all cases. Policies like structural and regional policy or agricultural policy are highly salient for the new member states, and development is not. Given the lack of salience it is perhaps unsurprising that the NMS have not been successful at building alliances or bargaining as they have very little to bargain in this policy area. Admittedly, the V4 states are only just learning how to play the game in Brussels in relation to building alliances and the example of the Eastern Partnership shows that some states are able to join forces with other (older) member states and pitch a policy proposal as being in the Community interest (see Pomorska 2011). The lack of capacity, in relation to skilful diplomats, a clear policy position, instructions from the capital etc., adds to the factors that hamper the influence of the NMS.

This conclusion runs counter to examples from other policy areas, which show that the V4 countries can influence policy preferences (Thomson 2010: 256). Is this therefore an example of weakness in relation to foreign policy or development policy? Bilčík (2010) argues that in strategically important areas, the V4 countries have successfully uploaded their policy preferences. Recent research suggests that the ‘V4 is not dead. It works best on non-controversial issues—transport infrastructure, energy security (especially gas interconnectors), and on questions where the V4 share a common position on EU questions, such as deepening the single market. In short, V4 works on matters where agreement does not require a large dose of political capital’ (Lucas 2014). It therefore looks more likely that the issue lies with the broad development policy area. In part this is because the V4 states have focused on maximising their influence on a narrow range of issues. It is only now, ten years on, that they might be able to consider influence across all the policy options within the EU. Membership of the OECD DAC and the growing importance of aid policy means that the V4 states will be expected to do more in this field. This should involve (but not be limited to) articulating what transition experience is in concrete examples and also situate it better in the Community interest. Building up capacity and experience should also allow them to play the Brussels game and upload national policy preferences onto the EU external relations agenda more regularly, as the evidence from other policy areas suggests they are doing already.

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2. There is overlap between these variables and those outlined by Nasra (2011) in relation to the ability of small states to influence the EU agenda. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See for example the Polish Development Cooperation Act accepted in 2011, which makes ‘promoting and supporting the development of democracy and civil society’ the primary goal of Polish development policy. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Interview with a former EC official, 15/02/2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See <http://capacity4dev.ec.europa.eu/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Interview with an EC official 21/01/2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See the regulation on the European Neighbourhood Instrument, which includes a reference to transition experience: ‘In European Neighbourhood countries, where alignment to Union rules and standards is one of the key policy objectives, the Union is best placed to deliver its support under this Regulation. Certain specific support can only be provided at Union level. Member States' transition experience can also contribute to the success of reforms in European Neighbourhood countries and to promoting universal values in the European Neighbourhood’ (European Union 2014: 11) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Interview with an EC official 23/01/2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Interview with a CEE diplomat 21/01/2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Interview with a CEE diplomat 29/01/2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Interview with an EC official 23/01/2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
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