

Central and Eastern European EU Member States' Involvement in the EU's Democracy Promotion in Central Asia

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This chapter examines whether European Union (EU) member states from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) seek to advance democracy in Central Asia through the EU rather than, or apart from, bilaterally. Focusing on Poland, Lithuania, Slovakia and Latvia, the analysis reveals that CEE countries appear unwilling to spend their scarce political and financial capital--be it bilaterally or at the EU level--to support democratisation in Central Asia, because it is not a priority region for them (at least not compared to the Eastern Partnership). They perceive the region as a difficult terrain for western-style democratization.

Pushing the EU's democracy promotion agenda further east?

Central Asia has been only a peripheral area in terms of the foreign policy interests and priorities of the Central and Eastern European (CEE) member states of the European Union (EU), with their main foreign policy focus being the EU's eastern neighbourhood and the Western Balkans. Yet, as part of a broader trend among the new member states in the last few years, several CEE

countries have been building stronger ties with Central Asia.¹ Many of the new member states have been in the process of redefining their national foreign policy, manifesting an increased interest in bolstering ties with countries and regions beyond their immediate vicinity, including East Asia--particularly China--and Central Asia. This process is the result of a combination of factors, in particular the economic crisis and the pressures of globalization, which have urged CEE countries to expand their market opportunities, as well as the effects of 'top down' Europeanization,² which have in turn facilitated a major overhaul of their foreign policies and pushed them to think about their national interests beyond their immediate borders.

At the same time, CEE EU member states' intensifying involvement outside their neighbourhood has been matched by the assumption of a more active role on foreign policy at the EU level. Since accession, CEE EU members have matured as policy entrepreneurs within EU foreign policy-making, in the sense that they no longer just 'download' foreign policy issues but are increasingly seeking to project their national foreign policy interests via EU institutions and to punch above their weight.³ Indeed, new member states also seek to 'upload' foreign policy interests onto the EU level.⁴ An illustrative example is Poland's successful attempts at pushing for the Eastern Partnership and the European Endowment for Democracy. After a decade of institutional adaptation to the workings of EU foreign policy-making process, most CEE member states now master the game and are increasingly able to play along with the older and more established member states.⁵

Yet, research on the direct involvement and impact of CEE EU member states on the EU's external policies, including democracy promotion, remains scarce.⁶ Apart from the Eastern Partnership area, where they hold a comparative advantage, there is very little knowledge about CEE countries' contributions to EU policies towards regions further afield, including Central Asia. To better understand CEE's role within the broader EU's democracy promotion agenda, as well as the motivations behind it, it is imperative to take a look at broader patterns and dynamics behind CEE's external policies and democracy assistance. This chapter does so by focusing on CEE member states' activities within the framework of the EU's policy towards Central Asia. In particular, it considers the role of CEE countries as democracy promoters and their reliance on the EU, if at all, to advance democracy in the region.

Within the broader framework of this volume, Central Asia provides a valuable test case for exploring a range of possible explanatory factors, along the strategic-normative continuum, to account for the motivations behind CEE countries' efforts to promote democracy. Moreover, it can serve to identify the conditions and mechanisms whereupon CEE countries infuse their foreign policy agendas with democracy promotion goals and activities.

From a normative viewpoint, Central Asia presents a viable opportunity for CEE states to push for democratization in the region via EU channels. Given that the five Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan were all part of the Soviet Union, the shared history and common economic links between CEE and Central Asia raise the expectation that CEE member states will have more pronounced foreign policy goals towards Central Asia than other EU member states which did not belong to the Soviet bloc. Moreover, in

trying to influence the EU's democracy promotion agenda, especially in the context of the Eastern Partnership, CEE countries could be expected to attempt to weave their transition experience into the EU's foreign policy.

At the same time, since Central Asia poses significant strategic challenges to Europe, CEE states could perceive EU-led democracy promotion as a gateway to greater security. Arguably, given their location on the EU's periphery and their closer geographical proximity and logistical links to Central Asia, CEE countries are more exposed than the rest of Europe to hard and soft threats, including Islamic terrorism, drug trafficking, organized crime, as well as to the risk of regional instability resulting from the possible spill-over from Afghanistan.⁷ In addition, several CEE countries also have economic interests--including energy interests--in Central Asia and have been strengthening their economic ties with the region in the last few years.⁸ Hence, it is especially interesting to ascertain to what extent security concerns and economic interests may be informing CEE engagement in democracy support in regions beyond the Eastern neighbourhood.

In the next sections the chapter outlines the theoretical assumptions underpinning the question of whether and why CEE countries may seek to rely on the EU to advance democracy in Central Asia rather than, or apart from, engaging in bilateral democracy assistance. To do so, the study draws on insights from the literature on Europeanization (of national foreign policies) and European foreign policy. The chapter then presents an empirical analysis of CEE democracy promotion in Central Asia, with the objective of establishing whether CEE countries have been seeking to leave their imprint on the EU's democracy promotion policy towards this region. The

research draws on data gathered through document analysis and elite interviews with diplomats and officials from CEE member states and the EU institutions.⁹ The empirical analysis focuses on four CEE countries that can be considered ‘most-likely cases’. On the one hand, the chapter examines Poland, Slovakia and Lithuania. These three countries have been selected because they have been the most eager CEE states in seeking to promote democracy in the post-Soviet space.¹⁰ On the other hand, Latvia has been selected because it is arguably the country with the strongest ambition to become more involved in Central Asia, both bilaterally and through the EU.¹¹ If we do not find evidence among these four cases, according to the most-likely case approach, we can assume that the other CEE member states will also not attempt to leverage their membership in the EU to support democratization in the region.

CEE Member States as (EU) Foreign Policy Entrepreneurs: Advancing Democracy in Central Asia through the EU?

EU member states often attempt to project or ‘upload’ certain national foreign policy objectives onto the EU level because of the possible ‘amplifying’ effect. In so doing, they can ‘pursue and even expand foreign policy objectives (in specific regions or with regard to specific themes) beyond those attainable with domestic capabilities,’ which is particularly convenient for small states.¹² If a state successfully manages to upload a national foreign policy goal onto the EU level, it can rely on budgetary, diplomatic and economic support from both EU institutions and other member states, allowing for that national foreign policy goal to be pursued more intensively and with a higher potential impact.

While it is generally acknowledged that EU foreign policy is highly subjected to the interests of large member states (in particular, Germany, France and the UK), some smaller EU member states, including Sweden or Finland, have already left a mark on the EU's foreign policy and succeed in projecting their interests onto the EU level.¹³ EU membership has allowed them to follow a more ambitious national foreign policy course, backed by the EU's political and economic weight and international standing.¹⁴ They have also benefitted strongly from the increased access to information and resources, which hugely exceed their own capabilities.¹⁵

At the same time, while the benefits of promoting national foreign policy goals through the EU are apparent, member states also remain committed to the centrality of national sovereignty as the guiding principle that shapes their foreign policy. Moreover, as the EU's legal competence in the area of foreign policy is still low, member states continue to pursue their foreign policy interests in parallel to, separately from, or even in opposition to the EU. The extent to which national sovereign imperatives operate in foreign policy is different in all 28 member states and varies on a policy by policy basis.¹⁶

The study assesses Poland, Lithuania, Slovakia and Latvia's efforts to promote democracy in Central Asia and explores to what extent these efforts are channelled through the EU rather than –or apart from--bilaterally. Each case is embedded in an overview of the state's overall relations with and foreign policy interests in Central Asia, including their trade relations, security and energy policies and development assistance. The analysis distinguishes between the different

democracy promotion instruments identified in this volume – diplomacy (persuasion, socialization, and pressure), assistance (technical and financial), conditionality (incentives and sanctions) and intervention (military or political, covert and overt coercion). In so doing, it tries to weigh the balance between strategic and normative motivations and approaches to democracy support.

Poland

Starting with Poland, in terms of strategic interests, its priorities in Central Asia lie with Kazakhstan, a close bilateral partner. Poland's close relationship with Kazakhstan is driven by three underlying factors. To begin with, there is a small Polish diaspora in Kazakhstan of about 50,000 people.¹⁷ Second, Poland has significant trade interests in Kazakhstan, which it seeks to pursue more intensively. In 2011, Polish-Kazakh trade amounted to more than USD 1 billion, about half of which consisted of Polish exports.¹⁸ Polish investments in Kazakhstan in 2011 totalled USD 119.5 million. This brings us to the third factor, namely energy interests, as the Polish oil and Gas Company Petrolinvest is a major player on the Kazakh energy market, where it has been operating since 2006.¹⁹

With respect to democracy and human rights, Poland has generally refrained from advocating a strong democracy agenda towards Kazakhstan as to preserve the close bilateral links. Warsaw has not publicly criticized the poor democracy and human rights record of the Kazakh government.

What is more, Poland has even voiced support for Kazakhstan's government in the open. A case in point is the backing of Kazakhstan's controversial bid to chair the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).²⁰ In a similar vein, Poland is usually reluctant to publicly oppose the Uzbek and Turkmen governments. Although Poland openly criticized the Uzbek regime's heavy-handed crackdown on the Andijan protest in 2005,²¹ it joined Germany's calls in 2007-2008 to lift the sanctions imposed by the EU after the massacre. In the case of Turkmenistan, Poland sees it as a possible alternative provider of its gas supplies, given its energy independence on Russia. As such, the Polish government was a strong supporter of the Nabucco gas pipeline project, which--had it been built--would have brought gas from Turkmenistan across the Caspian Sea to Central Europe.²² From this perspective, it is perhaps not surprising that Poland tends to be silent in public with respect to Turkmenistan's democracy and human rights record.

The remaining two countries, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, are prioritized by Poland through its development assistance.²³ In justifying the selection of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as recipient countries for Polish aid, the Polish government refers to the limited interest that other donors have shown for these two countries.²⁴ Poland defines Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan's development needs purely in terms of poverty reduction and does not refer to their need for political reform. For each recipient country three priority areas have been identified apart from the cross-cutting areas of democracy and transformation: self-governance and support for local communities; water and sanitation; and SMEs and job creation.²⁵ In practice, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan receive little development assistance from Poland. This is not surprising, given that 60 % of Polish bilateral aid is reserved for countries of the Eastern Partnership, while the remaining 40 % is

allocated to 15 priority countries from Africa and Asia, including Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.²⁶

Between 2007 and 2012, Poland implemented 11 projects in Kyrgyzstan as well as 11 projects in Tajikistan, worth about EUR 400,000 and EUR 600,000, respectively.²⁷ This is only a fraction of the total amount of Polish aid--EUR 1.86 billion--distributed in 2007-2012.²⁸

More importantly, only a small percentage of Polish aid allocated to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan has so far aimed to support democracy and political transformation. Of the 11 development projects implemented between 2007 and 2012 in both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the majority was in water management and rural development, with just a few, arguably insignificant, projects designed to foster democratic governance and develop civil society.²⁹ However, it should be noted that additional funding for pro-democracy projects is channelled through Solidarity Fund PL, a Polish State Treasury foundation set up in 2001. Solidarity Fund PL, a beneficiary of international donors, including the Visegrad Fund and USAID, has been a vehicle for democracy assistance in both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.³⁰ Substantively, the projects were aimed at training journalists and empowering independent media, civic participation and NGOs development.³¹ Similar initiatives have also been organized by the Polish embassy in Kazakhstan--which also covers Kyrgyzstan--although on a limited scale. Recent examples include a visit of Kazakh journalists to Poland and a workshop in Kyrgyzstan on active citizenship in support of democracy.³²

Central Asia seems therefore to constitute an exception to a general rule: democracy and human rights are singled out as a cross-cutting area of Polish development assistance, alongside political

and economic transformation. Polish development assistance thus aims at ‘improv[ing] the functioning of state institutions, promot[ing] good governance, protect[ing] democratic standards and human rights, and build[ing] and enhance[ing] civil society.’³³ On paper, 60 % of Polish development aid to the 15 priority countries from Africa and Asia is reserved for such initiatives. For the six recipient countries from the Eastern Partnership, a whopping 70 % is allocated to democracy and transformation.³⁴ In the case of Polish aid recipient countries from Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, the Polish government explicitly mentions that it ‘wants to foster changes that ensure long-term and stable functioning of democratic systems, respect for human rights and support for political transformation.’³⁵

Turning to Poland’s engagement at the EU level, the country has sought to influence the EU’s democracy promotion policy towards Central Asia in three ways. First, it has been highlighting the issue of democratization in Central Asia through EU-sponsored conferences. An initial signal that Poland is keen—at least to some extent—to leverage its membership in the EU to advance democracy in Central Asia came during its Presidency of the European Council in 2011. At the annual European Development Days, jointly organized by the Council Presidency and the European Commission, Poland convened a High Level Panel (HLP) dedicated entirely to Central Asia. The HLP focused on ways in which the EU could combine economic development with the concept of deep democracy to advance development in the region.³⁶ This approach fitted neatly with the overarching theme of the 2011 edition of the European Development Days, ‘Democracy and Development,’ a topic chosen in light of the Arab Spring and Europe’s response to it. At the conference, Poland also convened a HLP on ‘How to share transformation experiences,’ which featured then President of the Kyrgyz Republic, Roza Otunbayeva, as a high-level speaker.³⁷

These initiatives at the European Development Days might indicate that Poland believes that the transition experience of the CEE member states could, or should, be shared with countries in Central Asia.

Secondly, Poland has sought to leave its mark on the EU's democracy promotion efforts in Central Asia by exerting influence on the work of the EU Foreign Affairs Council. Issues pertaining to the Eastern Partnership (EaP), Russia and Central Asia are covered at the Eastern Europe and Central Asia (COEST) meetings, where Poland has been moderately active. While most COEST meetings on Central Asia feature little discussion, in sharp contrast to the COEST meetings on Russia and on the EaP, Poland has been slightly more vocal than other member states about democracy and human rights issues in Central Asia.³⁸ A case in point is the enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with Kazakhstan. Dissatisfied with the formulation of the clauses pertaining to human rights and democracy in the draft text of the agreement, Poland made annotations to the draft text in an attempt to upgrade the commitment to these principles.³⁹

Finally, the most noteworthy way in which Poland has steered the EU's democracy support in Central Asia has been through the European Endowment for Democracy (EED). Designed in the wake of the Arab Spring to complement the EU's existing instruments to promote democracy, the EED supports human rights and democracy activists and independent media in beneficiary countries of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) area. At the second meeting of the EED's Board of Governors, held in June 2014, Poland presented a proposal to extend the EED's

mandate to Russia and Central Asia.⁴⁰ The Polish proposal to include Central Asia in the mandate of the EED reflects Poland's belief that if democratic change does transpire in Central Asia, it will come from the grassroots level.⁴¹ Although the proposal was received with caution by other members of the board, at the board's next meeting in December 2014 it was officially decided that the EED's geographical scope would be extended beyond the countries of the ENP and that 2015 would serve as a pilot year in this regard.⁴² In an official statement it was noted that this new move is in line with the 2011 Council decision on the establishment of the EED, which states that the "Endowment will foster and encourage 'deep and sustainable democracy' in transition countries and in societies struggling for democratization, with initial, although not exclusive focus, on the European Neighbourhood."⁴³

Lithuania

Of the four countries examined, Lithuania has the least developed diplomatic relations—and thus seemingly the least pronounced strategic interests in Central Asia. Nevertheless, Lithuania's interest in Central Asia has grown significantly over the last decade, driven by a combination of commercial and security motivations. From an economic viewpoint, financial pressures at home after the economic crisis have pushed Lithuania to explore business opportunities in Central Asia, especially in Kazakhstan.⁴⁴ Bilateral trade with Kazakhstan has expanded considerably:⁴⁵ in 2013, the total volume amounted to EUR 590 million, of which three quarters were taken up by exports.⁴⁶ If in 2001 Lithuania exported roughly 0.27% of its goods to Kazakhstan, that number had risen to 1.06% in 2012.⁴⁷ Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Lithuania's trade relations

with the region have been mainly in the transit and logistics sector, owing to the railway system that connects Baltic Sea ports, including Klaipeda in Lithuania, with Central Asia. In the past few years, Lithuania has been eager to further exploit its commercial potential as a transit and transport hub with easy access to Central Asia. In 2012, it established a shuttle container train, which operates from Klaipeda to Chongqing in China, through Almaty in Kazakhstan.⁴⁸ Apart from the transit and logistics sector, food products and second-hand cars currently make up a significant part of Lithuanian exports to Kazakhstan.⁴⁹ Perhaps surprisingly, the Lithuanians – fully dependent on Russian gas – have shown little interest in the Central Asian gas market, as they are unlikely to benefit from any future gas pipelines running from Central Asia via the Caspian Sea to Europe.⁵⁰

From a security perspective, Lithuania has pursued a close relationship with Central Asia by intensifying military cooperation. Via its defence attaché in the region, it has organized several joint exercises and signed military cooperation agreements. In 2013, for instance, Lithuania agreed on a military cooperation plan with Kazakhstan, which committed both parties to information exchange on security matters and involvement in multinational operations and military reform.⁵¹ Moreover, Lithuania often takes part in joint military exercises with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in the framework of the ‘Steppe Eagle,’ an initiative that serves to enhance the readiness of non-NATO peacekeeping units to participate in NATO-led operations.⁵² Lithuania has also engaged with Central Asia through NATO’s operations in Afghanistan. As a dedicated NATO member, it has contributed troops to the Afghan mission, proving that ‘NATO membership is seen by the Baltic nations as the foundation for their own national security, so NATO policy and concerns regarding Central Asia are fully supported by the Baltic states.’⁵³ In addition, Lithuania – together with Latvia and Estonia – plays an important role

in NATO's cargo traffic to Afghanistan through the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), which runs from the Baltic ports overland to Afghanistan.

In terms of bilateral development aid, in which Lithuania highlights democratization and transformation processes, Central Asia is not a priority region. So far, it has implemented only three projects in the region: in Kyrgyzstan in 2005, Turkmenistan in 2008 and Tajikistan in 2009.⁵⁴ In comparison, over the same period, Lithuania supported 235 development projects in Belarus, 226 in Afghanistan, 137 in Georgia, 81 in Moldova and 72 in Ukraine.⁵⁵ In addition, the three projects in Central Asia have attracted little funding, of merely EUR 13,550 in total. Only one project was related to democratization: the Lithuanians provided legal training to help fight corruption in public education.⁵⁶ But given that the project cost only EUR 850,⁵⁷ one can hardly speak of results. This stands in stark contrast to Lithuania's heavy focus on democracy in bilateral development aid in general. In 2003-2013, 14 % of Lithuania's bilateral development assistance in 2003-2013 went towards human rights and democracy, and 12 % supported civil society development.⁵⁸ Yet only a tiny portion has been reserved for Central Asia.⁵⁹ This reflects the observation that when Lithuanian leaders publicly speak of the need to spread democracy further East, into the other territories of the former Soviet Union, they hardly ever mention the Central Asian countries.⁶⁰

Lithuania's apparent lack of interest in promoting democracy in Central Asia is reflected at the EU level, which has witnessed hardly any Lithuanian input into EU's democracy support to this region.⁶¹ A notable exception has been the country's role in annotating the draft text of the enhanced PCA with Kazakhstan. Like Poland, Lithuania was dissatisfied with the clauses

pertaining to human rights and democracy and therefore sought to upgrade the commitment to these principles in the draft text of the agreement.⁶² This seems to suggest that Lithuania, like Poland, does take an active interest in defending human rights and democracy in Kazakhstan, but that it thinks strategically about how to maintain its foreign policy focus on these issues without compromising its trade relationship with the country. In other words, the ‘closed’ nature of the EU decision-making process allows democracy champions like Poland and Lithuania to push for more democracy in authoritarian countries like Kazakhstan, where their main focus is trade, without endangering their bilateral economic ties.

Slovakia

Slovakia’s existing links to Central Asia are weak, as the region is not a foreign policy priority, even though its strategic interest in it has grown since EU accession. Slovakia is mostly active in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. As was the case of Poland and Lithuania, Slovakia mainly seeks to enhance its commercial presence there, especially in Kazakhstan. This became clear, *inter alia*, during the visits by the then Slovak President Ivan Gašparovič to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in April 2010 and the visit by the Speaker of the Slovak National Council to Kazakhstan in 2013.⁶³ In 2013, the volume of bilateral trade totalled around EUR 100 million, of which about four fifths were exports.⁶⁴ In 2012, Slovakia exported roughly 0.10% of its goods to Kazakhstan, making it only its 47th trade partner in terms of export volume.⁶⁵

Central Asia is also an attractive territory to explore energy sources, given Slovakia’s massive dependence on Russia for oil and gas supplies.⁶⁶ As a transit country situated in Central Europe,

Slovakia supported the Nabucco gas pipeline project, as it would have benefited from Turkmen gas flowing into Central Europe. Likewise, in an attempt to diversify oil providers, Slovakia has sought to boost imports from Kazakhstan, among others.⁶⁷

In the security realm, Slovakia has forged partnerships in Central Asia, much like Lithuania, due to its involvement in NATO's operations in Afghanistan. In the past decade, Slovakia's Ministers of Foreign Affairs have met their Central Asian counterparts on several occasions—usually on the margins of large international meetings, in particular those of NATO, UN and OSCE—to talk about the situation in Afghanistan.⁶⁸ In addition, Slovakia has engaged in so-called 'soft' security activities in the region, notably through its contribution to the OSCE's work on international crisis management in Kyrgyzstan in 2013, considered 'important in terms of strengthening Slovakia's standing in Central Asia.'⁶⁹ Following violent inter-ethnic clashes in South Kyrgyzstan in 2010, the OSCE initiated the Community Security Initiative (CSI), built around an international police advisory group based in the affected areas. The group supports the local police in dealing with the fragile security situation and restoring trust in the police. In 2013, the Slovak government contributed to the CSI by seconding one police advisor to the initiative.

As for development assistance, while democracy support has been an overarching priority of Slovakia's bilateral aid in the last decade, Central Asian countries usually benefit from support in different sectors.⁷⁰ Similarly to Lithuania, Slovakia approaches Central Asian countries from the poverty reduction perspective. In 2003-2008, for instance, the region featured prominently in Slovakia's development assistance: Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan were initially

priority beneficiaries of Slovak aid.⁷¹ In that period, 17 projects were implemented in Kyrgyzstan, 11 in Kazakhstan and 5 in Uzbekistan.⁷² However, none of the assistance rendered so far has purposefully been used for democracy support.⁷³ In Kyrgyzstan, aid mostly funded the development of high-mountain tourism, energy, waste management and social services. In Kazakhstan, most projects dealt with environmental protection, water management, ratification of the Kyoto Protocol and development of the business environment. In Uzbekistan, the projects focused on environmental management, agriculture and land slide prevention.⁷⁴ In Slovakia's next development strategy, for the 2009-2013 period, Central Asian countries were downgraded to 'project countries,' together with 12 others.⁷⁵ They stood apart from the three 'programme countries,' which would receive the largest share of Slovakia's development aid, namely Serbia, Afghanistan and Kenya. As a result of this strategic shift, the number of Slovak projects in Central Asia dropped significantly to three, and of those that were implemented, none focused on democracy support. Only one funding allocation, for an agricultural development project in Southern Kyrgyzstan, which received EUR 103,000, was financially significant.⁷⁶ Funding for the other two projects was almost negligible (EUR 440 and EUR 1,500).⁷⁷ Slovakia's latest multi-annual development strategy, for the 2014-2018 period, has even fewer priority countries—in line with the OECD/DAC recommendation on aid effectiveness and the EU's Agenda for Change, which do not include Central Asian states.⁷⁸

In contrast to Lithuania, however, Slovakia has also pursued activities in the field of democracy promotion in Central Asia, leveraging its membership in international organizations. Via the OSCE, for instance, it has participated in multiple election observation missions. In 2011, it sent two short-term election observers to the presidential elections in Kazakhstan, and also two short-

term election observers to the presidential elections in Kyrgyzstan.⁷⁹ With regard to Kazakhstan's bid to chair the OSCE in 2009, however, Slovakia took an overall ambivalent position: while it publicly supported the bid,⁸⁰ most probably to avoid compromising its trade relations with Kazakhstan, it opposed it during EU members' internal discussions held in preparation for the OSCE ministerial meetings, where the final decision on granting the chairmanship was to be made.⁸¹ In so doing, it sided with those member states, including the UK, Hungary, Slovenia and the Czech Republic, which felt that Kazakhstan was not ready to chair the OSCE before implementing democratic reforms.

In sum, with the exception of its participation in election observation and monitoring, Slovakia does not engage in democracy promotion in Central Asia. The disinterest in advancing democracy in Central Asia through bilateral channels is mirrored at the EU level, with virtually no Slovak attempts at influencing the EU's democracy promotion efforts in Central Asia.⁸²

Latvia

Latvia maintains a strong diplomatic presence in Central Asia and considers Central Asia a strategic priority, alongside the EU's eastern neighbourhood.⁸³ The interest in Central Asia is mainly driven by security and economic motivations.⁸⁴ NATO's mission in Afghanistan and its gradual phasing-out is a leading foreign policy issue.⁸⁵ Like Lithuania, Latvia considers NATO membership the foundation of its national security and, by extension, it fully supports NATO's

activities in Central Asia. Latvia is a leading actor in NATO's cargo traffic to Afghanistan through the NDN, acting as an entry point for both an air supply line and a rail supply line. Latvia's embassies in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan—used by NATO for transit from and to Afghanistan—have been operating as 'NATO Contact Point Embassies' to support the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission and transit activities.⁸⁶ Latvia also has other security concerns relating to Central Asia, mainly related to trafficking of people and drugs, as well as with respect to organized crime and illegal migration from Central Asia through Russia to Latvia. Therefore, Latvia has a direct interest in improving border management and drugs control capacities in the region.⁸⁷

As for economic interests, the NDN holds considerable economic benefits for Latvia, as it does for Lithuania, especially for the transport and logistics industry operating around its sea ports and Riga's international airport.⁸⁸ Latvia hopes that the transport corridor will in the future also be used for commercial cargos and seeks to further develop its potential as a transport hub for Central Asian exports. Like the other CEE countries examined here, Latvia's main trade interest lies with Kazakhstan. In 2012, the trade volume amounted to EUR 112 million, with the country exporting roughly 0.53% of its commodities to Kazakhstan.⁸⁹ Despite Latvia's efforts to increase its exports to Kazakhstan, however, the trade balance remains negative, as Latvian trade with Kazakhstan is currently dominated by oil imports. In 2012, Latvian exports to Kazakhstan amounted to €47 million and imports to €65 million.⁹⁰ Despite dependence on Russian gas, Latvia—much like Lithuania—has not demonstrated a direct interest in the construction of alternative supply routes from Central Asia via the Caspian to Europe, simply because it is unlikely that these pipelines would be able to supply the Baltic region.

Compared to the rest of the CEE countries, Latvia has not channelled its development aid into democracy promotion as extensively, so it is hardly surprising that it has not been doing so in Central Asia. Nevertheless, Central Asian countries have benefitted from Latvia's limited bilateral development assistance,⁹¹ which takes up less than 10 % of its total aid allocation, amounting to EUR 17.9 million in 2013.⁹² Previously, Latvia's development cooperation focused on the Eastern Partnership countries, particularly Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, and Afghanistan. It was active in Central Asia as a donor before 2014, but its aid in the region did not go beyond a number of ad-hoc projects, including an EUR 70,000 scheme to improve the food and veterinary monitoring system⁹³ and another one aiming to introduce the Portage early intervention system for children with special needs and their families, both in Kyrgyzstan.⁹⁴

As Central Asia recently graduated to a foreign policy priority, the region has now also become a priority target for development assistance. In one of its recent strategic documents, Latvia highlights that the Eastern Partnership and Central Asian countries are "foreign policy priority regions."⁹⁵ Moreover, Latvia claims that it 'has unique advantages for cooperation with these countries (recognition, positive image, reform experience, language skills).'⁹⁶ The government also wants to provide assistance 'in areas where there is demand for Latvian expertise.'⁹⁷ Of the funding of EUR 213,800 that Latvia committed to bilateral aid in 2014, a considerable share was dedicated to Central Asia.⁹⁸

Recent initiatives funded by development aid suggest that Latvia wants to start engaging in democracy promotion in Central Asia, at least in countries with some degree of openness. For instance, EUR 70,000 was committed to a grant competition for projects in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Belarus, Georgia and Moldova.⁹⁹ The priority fields included good governance and the rule of law, and even civil society development, alongside a number of non-democracy related areas, such as social protection, environment and rural development.¹⁰⁰ The priorities, different per country, were seemingly attuned to realities on the ground. For instance, in Kyrgyzstan, the most liberal country in Central Asia, two of the three priorities were related to democracy promotion, namely good governance and the rule of law—including reforms in public administration and decentralization of finances—and civil society development. In Uzbekistan, the most authoritarian country of the three, none of the designated priority areas targeted democracy, but rather economic reforms, social protection, environment and education.¹⁰¹ In 2014, Latvia also launched a training programme for civil servants and civil society actors from the Eastern Partnership and Central Asian countries. Coordinated by the Riga Graduate School of Law, the programme aims at enhancing the capacity of public administration and civil society as well as promoting reforms through the transfer of Latvia's experience and knowledge.¹⁰²

However, when it comes to national and EU-level diplomacy, Latvia has not been a vocal supporter of democratization in Central Asia thus far, although at the EU level this may be changing. It has previously been reluctant to openly criticize the political regimes in Central Asia, generally expressing support, rather than denouncing them. Like Poland, it backed Kazakhstan's bid to chair the OSCE in 2009, and it joined Germany's calls in 2007-2008 to suspend the sanctions imposed by the EU on Uzbekistan after the Andijan massacre.¹⁰³ More controversially,

rather than following other EU member states as well as the US in publicly condemning the Uzbek regime for its heavy-handed response to the protests in Andijan in May 2005, Latvia maintained close contacts with the Uzbek regime. Yet, the recent turn and growing interest in democracy assistance in Central Asia are already changing Latvia's positioning in the foreign policy debates in Brussels. Following the turmoil that erupted in Kyrgyzstan in the spring of 2010, Latvia took the lead within the EU's Council for Foreign Affairs in urging the other member states and the EU as a whole to call for elections in the country. Questioning the legitimacy of the provisional government, Latvia also noted that it was advisable for the EU to maintain relations only at the expert level.¹⁰⁴ Importantly, Latvia's pro-democracy advocacy was strongly linked to its interest in safeguarding stability in the region, as it called on the EU to approach the issue within a broader regional context.¹⁰⁵

Furthermore, early signals indicate Latvia is also likely to use its Presidency of the EU Council in 2015 to raise the issue of democracy promotion in Central Asia. The region is one of the priorities of Latvia's Council Presidency agenda, reflecting above all the country's security interests. Latvia seeks to move the EU's Central Asia policy forward in a number of areas, and in particular security, economy and energy issues, less so democracy promotion, except for civil society development.¹⁰⁶ Like Poland, Latvia has partly dedicated a high-level EU conference to democratization in Central Asia. In charge of organizing the launch event of the European Year of Development, Latvia put the focus of a high-level panel at the event on the role of good governance and democracy in development cooperation, with particular emphasis on the cases of the Eastern Partnership and Central Asia. Within that context, it invited the Minister of Education and Science of Kyrgyzstan, Elvira Sarieva, to share her country's experience with this topic

during the panel.¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that strategic motivations, mostly likely linked to Afghanistan, lurk behind these efforts.

Latvia's Presidency agenda is a clear case of an attempt to upload national interests to the EU level. Latvia admits that it seeks to rely on EU foreign policy mechanisms and instruments for Central Asia to pursue some of its foreign policy goals towards the region because it does not have the resources and capacities to achieve them on its own.¹⁰⁸ Therefore, it actively seeks to influence the EU's agenda by seconding national experts in areas where it has interests and expertise. In the case of Central Asia policies, Latvia is keen on offering the country's unique transition and reform experience to contribute to the implementation of EU assistance programmes in Central Asia, as it has been doing for EU programmes in Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova.¹⁰⁹ Overall, in acknowledging that it has an important role to play in exemplifying to the post-Soviet states how a country can make it through de-Sovietization, democratization and marketization, Latvia has found an important niche for itself within EU foreign policy that links directly to democracy promotion.

Explaining the Limited Involvement of CEE Democratizers in Central Asia

The analysis above has found little empirical evidence that CEE member states are seeking to leave their imprint on the EU's democracy promotion policy towards Central Asia. Even Poland, which has emerged as the pro-democracy champion at the EU level, has not been especially

active vis-à-vis Central Asia, with the notable exception of its proposal to extend the mandate of the European Endowment for Democracy. At both the bilateral and EU levels, CEE countries' activities in support of democracy in Central Asia are rather limited, both in scope and in number, especially when compared to CEE democratisation efforts in the EaP region.

Although there are multiple reasons behind CEE's limited involvement in democracy promotion in Central Asia, and they vary from country to country, it is still possible to offer a preliminary explanatory framework. First, although CEE states all have specific foreign policy interests in Central Asia, the region is not a priority for them to the extent that the Eastern Partnership countries are.¹¹⁰ Therefore, although CEE countries perceive Central Asia as a source of security threats and instability, they are reluctant to invest their scarce financial and diplomatic resources in supporting democracy in the region, and in offering assistance more generally.¹¹¹ These factors also explain their limited input in EU-level policies toward Central Asia. EU member states will normally try to project national preferences onto the EU when these concern issues that they consider very important.¹¹² If this is not the case, they will not invest efforts in attempts to influence the EU on that matter. CEE disinterest in Central Asia is neatly illustrated by the fact that most CEE countries tend not to employ a separate staff member to follow EU policies toward Central Asia at their Permanent Representations to the EU in Brussels. Indeed, in many cases, the Brussels-based diplomat responsible for Central Asia also covers the Eastern Partnership countries. Since the latter are much more important for CEE EU member states, they take up most of the diplomat's attention.

From a strategic viewpoint, most CEE governments prefer to avoid confrontation with authoritarian leaders in Central Asia on issues of democracy to safeguard their economic and security interests.¹¹³ This suggests that their normative inclination to defend democracy via foreign policy is overshadowed in Central Asia by interests in exploring the energy market and closer economic links, as well as by efforts to keep the authoritarian regimes on board in transnational security cooperation initiatives. However, it is important to highlight that CEE states behave differently at the EU level, in the sense that they tend to be much more critical of the Central Asian regimes in the ‘safe’ environment of EU debates, in contrast to the more cautious attitude assumed bilaterally. This could be interpreted as a deliberate attempt on their part to enhance their reputation as responsible and active players within the EU’s external policy’s framework as well as their role as pro-democracy actors. At the same time, it might indicate that CEE countries do want to speak up about human rights and democracy in Central Asia, but that they reflect strategically on how to do so in order to protect their interests in the region. Put differently, the ‘closed’ nature of the EU decision-making process allows democracy champions like Poland and Lithuania to push for more democracy in authoritarian countries like Kazakhstan without endangering their bilateral ties.

From a normative perspective, CEE countries’ reluctance to ‘invest’ in promoting democracy in Central Asia is exacerbated by their belief that the region presents a challenging terrain for democratization to flourish based on their transition know-how.¹¹⁴ In contrast to their approach to the Eastern Partnership area, CEE states generally believe that they have little common ground with the Central Asian region.¹¹⁵ Therefore, these donors also worry that their transition experience—whether offered bilaterally or through the EU—will be of limited value to the Central

Asian recipients. Moreover, since Central Asia's needs in terms of democratization pale in comparison to the basic development problems that the region is dealing with, CEE states believe that those should be addressed first.¹¹⁶ Offering development assistance to the region is thus considered more important than engaging in democracy promotion. Yet, although CEE countries have doubts as to whether there is a case for democracy support in the region at the moment, several of them believe that if democratic changes transpire, they will come from the grassroots level. Accordingly, they have been trying to encourage the EU to focus its democratization efforts in Central Asia on civil society, as reflected, for instance, in Poland's proposal to extend the mandate of the European Endowment of Democracy to Central Asia. In addition, CEE countries believe that democracy assistance has the greatest chance to succeed in Kyrgyzstan, the most open and liberal country in the region, which is why they have channelled their limited bilateral democracy assistance towards this country.¹¹⁷

Faltering democracy champions?

The chapter examined the role of Central European EU member states in advancing democracy in Central Asia via the EU. Focusing on four 'most-likely cases,' namely Poland, Lithuania, Slovakia and Latvia, the analysis—defying the expectation emerging from the literature—revealed that overall, CEE countries are not actively seeking to promote democracy in Central Asia, bilaterally or at the EU level. In explaining the overarching finding, the chapter pointed to several factors. Primarily, it seems that CEE member states are unwilling to spend their scarce political and financial capital to support democratization in Central Asia, not only because it is

not a priority region or because they wish to pursue ‘hard’ interests, but also because they feel that their limited resources would be wasted given their perception that western-style democratization would not find fertile soil in the region.

What do these conclusions tell us about the role of CEE EU member states as foreign policy entrepreneurs and agents of democracy promotion, especially at the EU level? To begin with, CEE is not a homogenous group. Poland stands out as the only country that has sought to directly influence the EU’s democracy promotion efforts in Central Asia. Hence, it could be argued that this case supports the assumption that member states will attempt to upload national foreign policy priorities onto the EU level, because membership can allow them to pursue and even amplify those beyond national capabilities. Nevertheless, it is important to note that even Poland’s involvement has been limited compared to its substantial efforts at uploading the pro-democracy agenda for the Eastern Partnership to the EU level. The reason why Poland appears to stand out from the others thus can have more to do with its stronger financial and administrative capacity, including diplomatic staff.

With respect to CEE countries as agents of democracy promotion, the findings of this chapter echo previous research done on the subject, which indicates that despite their ‘idealist’ reputation, advancing democracy abroad is a pragmatic approach to pursuing certain foreign policy objectives, especially in their neighbourhood.¹¹⁸ This explains why democracy support in a region like Central Asia falters in the face of ‘hard’ foreign policy goals, such as energy policy, security concerns and commercial interests. This puts CEE democracy promotion motivations

firmly on the strategic end of the strategic-normative continuum, and makes it seem that their behaviour is not that much different from that of ‘older’ EU member states. At the same time, the chapter found evidence of a distinct CEE approach to democracy assistance, which sets the countries apart from ‘older’ member states. CEE countries put strong emphasis on civil society support.¹¹⁹ Poland’s calls for greater EU involvement in Central Asia in this regard mirror earlier attempts by multiple CEE states for more civil society assistance in Eastern Europe, not least in Belarus, where many of them are directly engaged. The focus on civil society development shows that as new agents of democracy promotion, the CEE countries seem to be drawing on their own democratization experience.¹²⁰

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