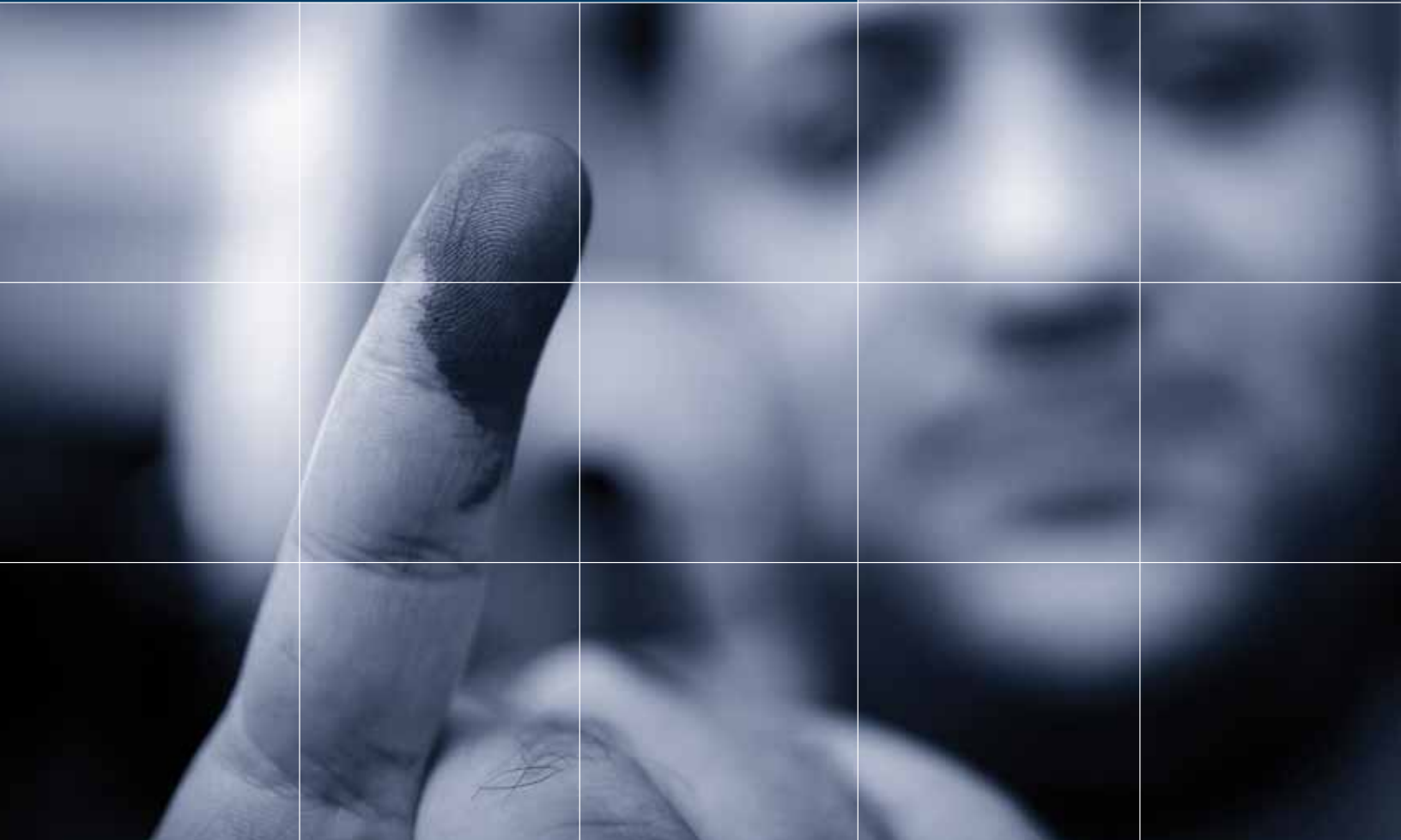




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**Central and Eastern European
Democracy Assistance in the Arab World**

Kristina Mikulova and Benedetta Berti



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Summary

The young democracies of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) are eager to share lessons from their post-Communist transitions with democratic aspirants. As revolutionary movements swept across the Middle East and North Africa, CEE actors offered their knowledge to help Arab countries, especially Tunisia and Egypt, with their attempted transitions to democracy. But to translate good intentions into real impact, CEE states must move past sharing general transition know-how and distinguish themselves from other aid providers.

Findings

- CEE donors believe they have important comparative advantages in democracy support in the Middle East and North Africa because they were not colonial powers in the region and because of their recent experience with political transformation. In their view, that experience translates into a special peer-to-peer dynamic with Arab partners.
- While revolutionary events unfolded in Tunisia and Egypt, CEE governments threw their rhetorical, diplomatic, and moral support behind the protesters.
- After the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, CEE actors sponsored experience-sharing conferences, seminars, study visits, and training sessions covering a range of issues, from economic and security sector reform to election monitoring and transitional justice.
- Long-term projects have been scarcer due to these countries' small aid budgets, but CEE assistance providers have creatively leveraged their resources and expertise through coalitions with their larger, more established American and Western European counterparts.
- In interviews, Arab recipients report that while CEE assistance has been useful, it has been underfunded and sometimes poorly targeted to local needs.

How CEE Governments Can Have a Lasting Impact

Promote innovative, decentralized approaches to democracy assistance.

CEE actors should establish an on-the-ground presence in the region and channel their limited funding into local civil society activities, especially to newer, less bureaucratic organizations pursuing more novel approaches, such as youth organizations working on direct democracy, citizen-led watchdogs monitoring

corruption and advancing transparency, and grassroots initiatives focused on transforming the political system through bottom-up activism.

Help facilitate the creation of robust civil societies. CEE activists should leverage their experiences with civil society building. They should offer advice on how to convert broad opposition movements united against old regimes into representative political parties and responsible civil society actors that can play a crucial role in fostering a democratic transition.

Adapt CEE lessons to meet recipient countries' unique needs. CEE governments should demonstrate that they understand better than other external actors how the smart adaptation of lessons from one region to another is what makes democracy support truly valuable.

Introduction

Recent converts are often endowed with missionary zeal. Following the downfall of Communism across Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), the former Soviet satellites in the region transformed into young democracies, teeming with many true believers in the founding values of the new regimes. Thanks to them, CEE foreign policy establishments quickly became known for displays of moral fiber in combating authoritarianism around the globe. The fervent advocacy earned CEE diplomats and activists a reputation as emerging experts in civil society building and advisers on transitions to democracy.

After entering the European Union (EU), CEE countries rebranded their efforts to extend the world's zone of freedom and prosperity. What they had before characterized as the general pursuit of democratic ideals they began describing more specifically as the exporting or sharing of their transition know-how. In the post-Soviet space in particular, CEE democracy work became a veritable industry in the 2000s. Currently, CEE governments sponsor millions of dollars' worth of democracy assistance projects in countries of the Eastern Partnership, such as Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine (which have some strategic agreements with but are not members of the EU). Complementing CEE governments' efforts are private consultancies staffed by former officials that offer policy advice on issues ranging from security and decentralization to good governance and EU integration.

Those CEE states that are members of the EU have also been trying to steer the union's foreign policy in a decisively value-laden direction, advocating a more pronounced and skillful projection of the union's soft power in its Eastern and Southern neighborhoods. Both the Eastern Partnership and the European Endowment for Democracy—an independent foundation created by the EU to advance freedom and democracy that is ideationally, if not institutionally, inspired by its American counterpart, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED)—are at least partially triumphs of CEE policy entrepreneurship.

CEE democracy work became a veritable industry in the 2000s.

Encouraged by the commitment and past achievements of CEE policy-makers in the field of democracy assistance, Western donors, including the NED, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Freedom House, and private philanthropies such as the Open Society Foundations, have been tapping the potential of these recent graduates of democratic transition, especially for work within the former Soviet Union. These donors have earmarked resources for projects executed by veteran CEE democracy activists and have hired or seconded CEE political heavyweights, such as former Estonian prime minister Mart Laar, as members of international consultancy groups. Central European

The Arab Awakening opened the door to a vital new target region for Central and Eastern European democracy support.

activists have advised their Eastern counterparts on a range of topics, from tax system overhaul and judiciary reform to the drafting of minority rights legislation.

The Arab Awakening opened the door to a vital new target region for Central and Eastern European democracy support. CEE governments, politicians, civic actors, and intellectuals immediately embraced the challenges of providing guidance to democratic aspirants across the

Middle East and North Africa (MENA), demonstrating not just a readiness but also a remarkable zeal to offer their assistance. Early images of former Polish president Lech Wałęsa hobnobbing with opposition politicians in Tripoli or of Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski offering to fly refugees from Benghazi to safety in his jet initiated a heated debate about whether lessons drawn from post-Communist transitions to democracy in CEE states are transferable to the Arab world.

CEE activists hoping to play a useful role in the social and political changes taking place across the MENA region believe these lessons give them a comparative advantage over other international democracy assistance providers. In seeking more active involvement in the political affairs of MENA countries, they are striving to simultaneously boost democratic movements in the region and establish CEE democracy assistance as a global foreign policy brand.

To this end, CEE countries have established a range of democracy assistance initiatives in MENA since the Arab Awakening. While these efforts have been generally well received,¹ there is room for improvement. To provide deep, lasting democracy support to the Arab world, CEE donors should focus not only on sharing insights from their own political transitions but also on adapting these lessons to the unique needs of MENA recipients, who tend to see a disconnect between what is offered and what is needed.

Motivations and Comparative Advantages

As Tunisia erupted in protests in late 2010 following Mohamed Bouazizi's tragic act of protest by self-immolation—unleashing a tide of social and political upheaval that proceeded to wash across North Africa to the Middle East

and beyond—CEE countries jumped at the opportunity to contribute to the international efforts to assist the struggling MENA revolutionaries. Because these nations lacked a coherent and consistent MENA policy before the onset of the Arab Awakening, their response to the events in the Arab world seemed as spontaneous as the wind of change itself. In reality, however, CEE countries saw involvement in the MENA political transitions as a chance to further both their interests and their values.

Czech, Slovak, Polish, Bulgarian, Serbian, and other policymakers in the region assessed the Arab Awakening as an opportunity to diversify the CEE democracy assistance enterprise and turn it into an international foreign policy brand. As the dramatic events unfolded, heavyweight foreign ministers, such as Sikorski from Poland or Nikolay Mladenov from Bulgaria, attempted to upgrade their countries' reputations for prodemocratic freedom fighting by speaking out in support of the demonstrators in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere. They used charged language that strongly resonated with the values of individual liberty, free expression, and freedom of assembly.

This emphasis on prodemocratic discourse is a notable feature of Central and Eastern Europeans' approach to democracy support, one rooted in their unique transition experience. Game-changing language used ahead of the 1989 revolutions, such as then U.S. president Ronald Reagan's labeling of the Soviet Union as the "evil empire" or then Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's reference to a "common European home," shifted the borders of what was deemed an appropriate delineation of the Cold War discursive space. This experience engendered the belief among CEE political leaders that condemning authoritarian excesses and vocally backing the democratic opposition count just as much as other measures of support, such as military intervention or development aid.

This is one of the reasons why, as the Arab Awakening unfolded, policymakers and opinionmakers in CEE countries attempted to speak out more openly and with less guarded language against the authoritarian administrations of former presidents Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt than some of their counterparts in Western European and North American governments. It also helped that, unlike the United States or France, CEE countries had few vested interests—be they strategic or economic—in the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes, which means they risked relatively little by supporting the revolutionaries.

On the EU level, CEE states became a powerful voice calling for a boost in assistance to MENA civil society in the early days of the Arab Awakening. Krzysztof Stanowski, former under secretary of state at the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, gave an account of the initial understanding of the significance of the Arab revolts to CEE nations:

In early 2011, we held a conference “Solidarity with Belarus,” with 37 participating countries. We tried to explain to the audience that Eastern Europe is our neighborhood, just as it should be for France or Italy. In turn, North Africa is our neighborhood as well, just as it is for France and Italy. It is crucial that we use our collective power to reach out to the civil society in undemocratic or democratizing states.

Central and Eastern Europeans also began to consider aiding democracy activists and advocates in the MENA region as strategically important. They thought of it as a way to ensure good relations with the political successors to the falling Arab autocrats. But they based their prodemocratic stance on more than mere geopolitical flexing of CEE soft power.

The emerging CEE efforts to share transition know-how with Tunisians and Egyptians also reflected a widespread belief in Central and Eastern Europe that such actions were intrinsically good and appropriate. Former dissidents, public intellectuals, and activists endorsed their governments’ new commitment to devote more attention—in the form of diplomatic relations, aid, and experience sharing—to the MENA region as a moral imperative. The rationale for the strategic repositioning of democracy assistance toward MENA was well captured by Slovakia’s Foreign Minister Miroslav Lajcak:

[Slovakia] as a state and . . . [its] nongovernmental sector cannot succumb to complacency, and we need to seek out new challenges and stimuli. We have a positive experience with democratic transition that Germany, the Netherlands, or France cannot offer because they simply do not have it. It is good for us to venture out of our Western Balkans/Eastern Partnership “comfort zone” and offer it in environments that are more difficult or less intuitive to test and reevaluate our lessons.

There was also a sense of indebtedness on the part of CEE activists and intellectuals to the role of outsiders in democratic transitions, stemming from the West’s role as midwife to the CEE democracies. These sentiments were shared by pockets of the political elite, such as Sikorski, who explained:

We hope to launch the European Endowment for Democracy simply because the . . . [National] Endowment for Democracy was so helpful to us in the 1980s and 1990s. We believe that Europe, being a developmental superpower, should have such a rapid reaction mechanism, so that we are not surprised by political developments such as the Arab Spring. So that we do the work of sustaining democrats, at least in our neighborhood, irrespective of the deals we have to make with their governments.

As one analyst put it, for many Czechs, Latvians, or Romanians, watching the Arab Spring bloom was like screening a film of their own youth. Their urge to help stemmed from pure solidarity.

Central and Eastern Europeans' various motivations to support democracy in the MENA region combined with their belief that foreign assistance matters—be it in the form of moral, diplomatic, or financial support—which also derived from the experience of the post-Communist transitions. The exceptional nature of this wave of democratization, however, has led some CEE actors to idealize certain aspects of it, such as the contribution of civil society to the democratic awakening. Some also ascribe excessive causal weight to international factors, including soft power. And a number of CEE experts admit that activists from Central Europe might sometimes mistake social upheaval in response to economic hardship for civic resistance to authoritarian oppression. This conflation may contribute to disappointment on their part when civic resistance subsides or fails to show political ambition and organizational unity.

Many CEE actors appear to believe that in MENA they are better equipped and better placed than some of their North American or Western European colleagues to communicate key prodemocratic messages and policy recommendations. This assumption has two roots. The first is the fact that no CEE country was a colonial or postcolonial power in the MENA region. On the contrary, having spent four decades in the Soviet orbit as satellites, Central and Eastern Europeans think they can relate to important parts of Middle Eastern history. “In 1989, we were also a country trying to pick itself up after fifty years of colonial rule,” says Tomas Bokor from the Slovak nongovernmental organization (NGO) People in Peril.

The second reason for CEE countries' confidence in their potential contributions to the region is their direct experience with political transformation, which creates a peer-to-peer dynamic. This type of interaction makes it easier for CEE donors and transmitters of transition knowledge to communicate with recipients of democracy assistance and increases the chances that legal, institutional, and organizational innovations will be adopted. Hence, Central and Eastern Europeans believe they are not just teachers because they were in fact until very recently pupils of North Americans and Western Europeans in the 1990s. Also, they are not mere theorists but also practitioners who recently implemented their own democratic transformations. Daniel Stefanov of the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs put it this way:

For example, to tell [a MENA audience] about domestic election observation, we would send someone who did this at the beginning of the 1990s in Bulgaria. If a specialist on that from the United States or Europe were dispatched, the guy would tell them the theory that they could read in the [Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe] or EU publications. The real practice is with us.

Driven by both the conviction that CEE democracy veterans can offer uniquely valuable insight to MENA revolutionaries and the certainty that doing so would further their own interests, CEE states set their sights on taking their democracy assistance enterprise to the Arab world.

The Arc of CEE Democracy Assistance in the MENA Region

Prior to the onset of political uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa, CEE governments and policy experts largely perceived the region as one of secondary strategic importance. This is not to say that bilateral relations between the two regions were absent. Cultural ties, tourism, trade, investment, and economic development agreements had certainly existed for decades, and cooperation intensified after CEE states became members of the EU.²

Among the few examples of active CEE democracy support in MENA that predate the recent wave of regime change are noteworthy assistance projects spearheaded by Czech and Serbian activists. In the mid-2000s, the Czech NGO People in Need ran training programs for Iraqi journalists and civil servants with the support of the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Belgrade-based Center for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies made some valuable attempts to encourage informed civic activism in the MENA region before the Arab Awakening. Co-founded by Srdja Popovic, a former leader of the civil society opposition movement Otpor! that actively worked to help bring about the downfall of Serbian strongman Slobodan Milošević in 2000, the center has always maintained a cross-regional focus, in contrast to other CEE NGOs. Before the MENA revolutions, its trainers organized several strategic workshops on nonviolent civil resistance and shared their know-how and experience from the Bulldozer Revolution that overthrew Milošević. According to Ivan Marovic, a former trainer at the center:

Usually people have an unsuccessful protest, go back to contemplation, look for inspiration, learn about it, and then they try again. In Egypt, the people involved in the . . . [political protests] of 2005 and 2006 educated themselves and then were involved in the ouster of Mubarak. There was a similar pattern in Serbia—1996 and 2000, and in Ukraine—2001 and 2004.

Speaking about the center's activities across MENA, Popovic said that "the region contains one of . . . [the organization's] biggest successes, Lebanon, and one of its most disappointing failures, Iran." Linking the center's work to the events of 2011, Popovic added:

Among the leaders of the movement that brought down Mubarak were members of the April 6 Youth Movement, who came to Belgrade in 2009 to learn how to conduct peaceful demonstrations and cope with violence from security forces without resorting to it themselves.

These examples illustrate that CEE countries made some isolated—and, to a certain extent, successful—attempts to provide democracy assistance to the MENA region before the recent wave of demonstrations and political transitions. But the Arab Awakening marked the beginning of a paradigm shift in the region's relations with MENA, sparking CEE interest in tightening bonds in general and contributing to democratization in particular.

CEE Responses to the Arab Awakening

While revolutionary processes were still unfolding in Tunisia and Egypt, CEE governments threw their rhetorical, diplomatic, and moral support behind the protesters. During the 2011 demonstrations in Cairo's Tahrir Square, Bulgarian Foreign Minister Mladenov publicly pleaded with Mubarak and his administration to “answer the expectations for change, democracy, and greater political representation” and urged Europe to “support Egypt on the road to reforms and change in the name of a greater participation of society in the country's governance by avoiding destabilization, violence, and chaos.”³

Among other CEE voices calling for change, Latvia's then foreign minister, Girts Valdis Kristovskis, expressed his admiration for the undaunted revolutionaries and his hopes for a nonviolent transition:

Latvia supports [the] dedication and courage of the Egyptian people in seeking democratic changes in their country. . . . We hope that the Egyptian people will find a peaceful and non-violent way to implement [a] transition to democracy and free and fair elections.⁴

Audronius Azubalis, then the Lithuanian foreign minister and chairperson of the Community of Democracies—an intergovernmental organization focused on “promoting democratic rules and strengthening democratic norms and institutions around the world”⁵—stated that he would be happy to oversee Egypt's admission into the organization, should it choose to apply.⁶

After both Ben Ali and Mubarak fell in early 2011, CEE countries moved past expressions of solidarity to offer substantive democracy support. As early as February 16, 2011, days after Mubarak's ouster, the Czech ambassador to Egypt, Pavel Kafka, highlighted supporting economic reform as a top priority for Egypt. Kafka stated that “this is where I see an opportunity for the Czech Republic to pass on its experiences, which it gained in the relatively recent period of transformation.”⁷

Following the Czech Republic's swift reaction, Poland and Slovakia also volunteered to share their transition know-how with Tunisia and Egypt. Slovakia offered its expertise to Tunisia on three key issues: civil society development, election observer training, and security sector reform.⁸ Publicizing a latent doubt about NATO's intervention in Libya, the Polish government emphasized that democracy assistance constitutes the core of its activities in the region:

We are not sending the F-16 combat aircraft to North Africa. We are sending Lech Walesa. . . . Poland will support the transformations there by training the cadres of “new democracy” and sharing transformation experience.⁹

A Rush of Conferences, Workshops, and Study Visits

CEE countries have varied records in terms of following up on their offers of democracy assistance with substantive actions. Poland, Slovakia, and the

Czech Republic have been at the forefront of the CEE-MENA democratization enterprise. Romania, Bulgaria, Estonia, and Hungary have also been somewhat active, but less so. CEE NGOs (often with funding from their governments) have been playing a crucial role in implementing assistance programs by creating platforms for discourse on global best practices and CEE transition knowledge.

CEE democracy assistance has mainly revolved around short-term ventures. Long-term projects funded by CEE governments and implemented by local NGOs and civil society—a model commonly used by bigger donors, such as the United States or the EU—have been scarcer due to financial constraints. CEE countries are smaller, politically weaker, and far less affluent than their Western counterparts, and their contributions can hardly match those of democracy assistance “heavyweights” like the United States.

CEE NGOs have been playing a crucial role in implementing assistance programs by creating platforms for discourse on global best practices and CEE transition knowledge.

The scope of the experience sharing between CEE and MENA has been fairly broad and has covered crucial issue areas, including NGO management and leadership training, journalism and free media, citizen self-government and election monitoring, anticorruption, and transitional justice. Various channels have been used to direct the stream of know-how to relevant Tunisian and Egyptian stakeholders in government and beyond: bilateral govern-

ment meetings, government-NGO cooperation, exchange programs, international conferences, local trainings, and seminars.

In particular, international conferences focused on democratization, civil society, and good governance proliferated in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Ben Ali and Mubarak governments as CEE states focused on delivering their lessons to their MENA counterparts. In most cases, the conferences aimed to facilitate ideational exchange among CEE experts, MENA government officials, and leading civil society activists in the hopes of establishing a network that could provide structural support for a broader and more long-term learning process.

For example, as early as July 2011, the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Permanent Electoral Authority of Romania, the UNDP, and the UN’s Electoral Assistance Division brought together roughly 40 Egyptian and Tunisian government officials, NGO leaders, and community organizers, as well as an equal number of politicians and experts from Romania and the greater CEE area, for a three-day forum in Bucharest entitled “North Africa and Eastern Europe: Viewpoints and Shared Experiences of Transition—A Bridge Over 20 Years.”¹⁰

In the same vein, Poland organized its first major event—focused on early-stage political reform in Tunisia—in July 2011. Tunisia’s then minister of regional development, Abderrazak Zouari, attended the event in Warsaw. He welcomed further collaboration with Poland by stating, “Tunisia is in the same situation as Poland in 1989. . . . Early on, we would like to carry out democratic changes based on Poland’s experience.”¹¹

Bulgaria also contributed to the string of CEE-MENA conferences via its Foreign Ministry's Sofia Platform, designed as a "venue for dialogue and exchange of views" between nongovernmental organizations, journalists, politicians, and practitioners from Europe, the Middle East, and the United States. The platform allows CEE actors to share applicable lessons from the post-Communist transformation.¹²

In addition to creating opportunities for discourse on democratization at the international level, CEE's democracy assistance pipeline has fueled local debate in Tunisia and Egypt via conferences held at embassies and consulates in Tunis and Cairo.¹³ As a result, a number of initiatives were spearheaded at the local level on topics such as civil society development, media freedom, and administrative reform (see table 1).

Table 1. CEE Government-Led Conferences and Platforms for MENA Transitions

Donor	Recipient	Timing	Category	Focus
Romania (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Permanent Electoral Authority of Romania, UNDP, UN Electoral Assistance Division)	Egypt and Tunisia (40 government officials, NGO leaders, and community organizers)	July 2011	International	Designing the electoral framework; ensuring transparency and accountability of elections and electoral observation; understanding the impact of elections on the political party system; and setting up the basis of participatory democracy
Poland	Tunisia	July 2011	International	Transmitting lessons from Poland's "shock therapy" economic transformation; transitional justice; and building free and independent media
Bulgaria (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sofia Platform)	Egypt and Tunisia	May and December 2011	International	May: free media and civil society; anticorruption strategies; and capacity building December: transitional justice (addressing previous human rights abuses and the legacy of totalitarianism; democratizing the judiciary)
Poland (Ministry of Foreign Affairs)	Tunisia (100 activists and civil servants under the age of thirty-five)	October 2011	Local	Civil society development

Czech Republic (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, think tank Glopolis, and National Authority for the Reform of Information and Communication)	Tunisia (40 journalists)	November 2011	Local	Media freedom
Poland (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Polish Foundation in Support of Local Democracy)	Egypt (government, opposition, and civil society)	April 2012	Local	Administrative reform and decentralization

Complementing government efforts, CEE NGOs began holding ad hoc democracy and civil society training in Tunisia and Egypt.¹⁴ Although they primarily focused on adapting the lessons from Central and Eastern Europe to North Africa and the Middle East, these programs also sought to develop the management and organizational skills of local civil society actors and non-profit groupings. For example, Tunisian activist Mouheb Garoui of I Watch—a youth NGO focused on transparency, justice, and the rule of law—praised the capacity-building program designed by Slovak NGO Pontis Foundation. Pontis workshops brought experts from Slovakia and Ukraine to Tunisia and sent a Tunisian delegation to Slovakia. This practice was emulated by a number of CEE NGOs working with their Tunisian and Egyptian counterparts.

Like Pontis, many other CEE NGOs have encouraged CEE governments to bring aspiring MENA activists, community organizers, and activists to Europe for short educational visits. Polish ambassador to Cairo Piotr Puchta explained that the NGO sector influenced Foreign Minister Sikorski to begin organizing study tours to Poland as early as May 2011. In a similar vein, a delegation from the Egyptian think tank Information and Decision Support Center attended lectures in Poland on democratization, free-market institutions, anticorruption strategies, and free media, and then briefed the Egyptian government. Following positive evaluations of this scheme, similar efforts were broadened and deepened. In September 2011, the Lech Wałęsa Institute, a think tank founded by the former Polish president to support democracy in Poland and worldwide, and the European Solidarity Center, which aims to build a global labor movement, launched the Solidarity Academy. This educational program sends activists from countries striving for or experiencing democratic transition—including Egypt and Tunisia—to Poland for an intensive four-day trip to foster dialogue between local leaders and Polish experts.¹⁵

At the same time, elected officials from Central Europe traveled to the Middle East with the objective of strengthening bilateral relations.¹⁶ CEE activists also spearheaded mixed government-NGO delegations seeking to foster both official and grassroots links to Tunisia and Egypt.¹⁷ For example, Wałęsa led a delegation of transition experts to Tunisia in April 2011. He proclaimed that he would be going to Tunisia as a revolutionary, adding: “the people of Tunisia need our solidarity. I will share my experience, but it will be the Tunisian people who will decide if they use these methods.”¹⁸ Just two months later, Bogdan Borusewicz, head of the Polish Senate and co-founder of Solidarity, the labor union and civic movement that helped trigger Poland’s political transformation, took a similar trip.¹⁹

Slovak NGOs were also active on this front. Pavol Demes, former Slovak foreign affairs minister and a longtime civil society activist, traveled to Libya with the same mission as Wałęsa. Former dissident intellectual and ambassador to the United States Martin Butora—currently at the head of the Institute for Public Affairs, a Slovak think tank dedicated to promoting democratic values in public policy and decisionmaking—also spearheaded multiple discussions on democratization via the Community of Democracies and other platforms.

Longer-Term Initiatives Supported by CEE

Official Development Assistance

Program-based democracy assistance, pursued in parallel with the flurry of conferences, workshops, and study visits, also emerged after the Arab Awakening via government-to-government cooperation as well as through CEE NGOs.

Foreign ministries and novice development cooperation bodies such as PolishAid, or the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ Development Cooperation Department, responded to the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions by distributing official development assistance funding reserved for unexpected events. These funds then supported NGO projects focused on a variety of objectives, including: electoral education; reforms in the security sector, judicial system, and public administration; assistance with regional development; and the promotion of civil society’s role.²⁰ Most of these projects were implemented by CEE NGOs directly in MENA and were short term (three to four months), underfunded, and modest in their aims.

Poland, which was the largest CEE donor in 2011, committed over \$9.9 million to the MENA region as a whole. Polish development assistance supported a range of programs aimed at drawing transferable lessons from the CEE transitions. These schemes involved a cross-section of government ministries in addition to NGOs.

A notable example of a brief but high-impact Polish project was the invitation of seven Tunisian election observers and several representatives of Egypt's High Electoral Commission to Poland's October 2011 parliamentary election. Despite its limited scope, this endeavor had a tangible impact in Egypt: some of the procedures that the monitors observed in Poland, such as voting from abroad through embassies, were subsequently introduced in their country. Moreover, Egypt reciprocated Poland's invitation ahead of its parliamentary elections in February 2012. This is noteworthy because Poland's European Solidarity Center was the only European organization invited to witness Egypt's vote.²¹

The Polish government established an even more permanent presence in Tunisia. At an early brainstorming conference in April 2011 at the U.S. embassy in Warsaw, five members of the *Zagranica* Group, an association of Polish NGOs involved in international development and democracy support, expressed interest in working in Tunisia. Since then, these five organizations—the Polish Robert Schuman Foundation, the Other Space Foundation, the Foundation in Support of Local Democracy, the Education for Democracy Foundation, and the Center for International Relations—have been drafting strategies to promote a culture of volunteering, urban development in local communities, support for independent civic organizations, and free media (including encouragement of citizen journalism).²²

Following a Polish-Tunisian roundtable in July 2012, Poland decided to invest in creating an intergovernmental Polish-Tunisian Institute for Democracy and Development to share its expertise in enacting reforms and to support democracy dialogue and civil society building.²³ Co-run and co-financed by representatives from both countries, it is a rare example of a joint CEE-MENA venture with on-the-ground presence and an aspiration to set the tone of local discourse on transition in the long run.

Other CEE countries took varying approaches to both the amount of funding they directed toward longer-term efforts and the composition of the projects. The Czech Republic, through its Transition Promotion Program, funded four small projects using official development assistance in 2011. However the total amount of resources committed to the Middle East overall was quite small: in 2011, the Czech Republic spent only \$3.26 million, or 1.3 percent of its total official development assistance, on bilateral assistance in the Middle East, allocating \$390,000 of this amount to Egypt to cover programs focused on civil society support.²⁴ Leading Czech NGOs People in Need, Europeum, and the Association for International Affairs focused on sharing transition know-how, training journalists, and raising awareness about women's rights. Czech activists hint that hesitance to commit more development assistance resources stems, in part, from their country's longtime staunch pro-Israeli foreign policy stance.

Slovakia, which is an even less affluent donor than the Czech Republic, initially spent about \$130,000 on both Egypt and Tunisia in May 2011 and committed more funding over the course of the year. Slovakia's example indicates that more funding can be allocated from modest official development assistance budgets if support for new recipients is designated as a strategic priority. Slovakia's approach, however, was less diversified in terms of project composition than that of the Czech Republic. (See table 2 for a summary of Slovak programs funded by official development assistance in Egypt and Tunisia.)

Table 2. Slovak Democracy Assistance Funded by Official Development Assistance in MENA (2011)

Implementing Slovak NGO	Recipient Country	Project	Amount of Official Development Assistance
Pontis Foundation	Egypt	Slovak-Egyptian Partnership for Democracy	\$65,256
	Tunisia	Building Partnerships for Democracy in Tunisia	\$123,955
Partners for Democratic Change Slovakia	Tunisia	Role of Civil Society in the Transition Period: Slovak Experience	\$91,368
	Tunisia	Enrooting the Success Story of Change in Tunisia: Public Dialogue and Civic Awareness	\$130,258
eSlovakia	Egypt, Tunisia	Ambassadors of Democracy	\$90,797
Civic Eye (part of the European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations)	Tunisia, Egypt	Observing Egyptian parliamentary and presidential elections; training Tunisian observers	\$156,636

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Slovak Republic

The general resource scarcity in CEE countries is one of the reasons why CEE donors placed more emphasis on providing support to their own NGOs working in the MENA region rather than Tunisian and Egyptian civil society groups, many of which were attempting to implement long-term educational campaigns aimed at raising awareness about democracy and developing democratic habits within their societies. CEE governments found it easier to keep tabs on their expenditures by allocating them to trusted home organizations, not local actors, especially as their relative inexperience in the MENA region made it more difficult for them to identify the right local aid recipients.

The lack of resources also contributed to the staggering difference in the amount of official development assistance committed by CEE countries and that distributed by wealthier, more experienced Western donors, both in absolute terms and as a percentage of gross national income (GNI). Even the largest CEE donor, Poland, spent only 0.08 percent of its GNI on development aid in 2011, falling far below both the 0.7 target for official development assistance set at the 2002 UN International Conference on Financing for Development and the 0.2 and 0.4 spent, respectively, by the United States and Germany (see tables 3 and 4).²⁵

**Table 3. Net Official Development Assistance in 2011
(millions of U.S. dollars)**

Country	Amount of Official Development Assistance
United States	30,745
Germany	14,553
Netherlands	6,324
Sweden	5,606
Poland	417
Czech Republic	256
Slovak Republic	87
Hungary	140

Source: OECD, April 4, 2012, www.oecd.org/dac/aidstatistics/50060310.pdf

Table 4. **Official Development Assistance as a Percentage of GNI (2011)**

Country	Percentage of 2011 GNI
United States	0.2
Germany	0.4
Netherlands	0.75
Sweden	1.02
Poland	0.08
Czech Republic	0.13
Slovak Republic	0.09
Hungary	0.11

Source: OECD

An additional driver of the CEE countries' conservative approach is their relative inexperience with official development assistance. For instance, Poland only made its first contribution to the European Development Fund, which collects voluntary donations by EU member states to fund international development programs, in 2011, in addition to its aid contribution to the EU budget.

Most CEE donors possess only a limited understanding of the goals of official development assistance and the mission of the international donor community. They often prioritize democracy support over poverty reduction, making the former the focal point for their cooperation with the developing world. This approach has been criticized by several international development organizations, including AidWatch, an organization made up of a group of European Confederation for Relief and Development's experts.²⁶

Of the CEE countries, only regional leader Poland has shown an aspiration to provide grants sponsoring local prodemocracy organizations working in the field. Following the Arab Awakening, the government reshuffled the institutional frameworks for official development assistance in an attempt to establish a financial base for lengthier and more substantive assistance schemes that could address structural problems in recipient states. The changes began with the 2011 endorsement of the Act on Development Cooperation by the Polish parliament. The bill, which came into force in January 2012, diversified the system of Polish democracy aid by establishing the International Solidarity Fund, a governmental body overseen by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and specializing in democracy support. Since its inception, the fund has been an umbrella for long-term Polish involvement in Tunisia, based on structured and institutionalized cooperation between Polish and Tunisian NGOs and focused on building local capacity rather than just sharing transition know-how. Some of these efforts have already borne fruit: the fund has a comprehensive Poland-Tunisia Support for Civil Society Development program, which organized a range of trainings and study visits for 60 youth and local NGO leaders from 36 organizations in 2012.

Building Coalitions, Using International Organizations, and Incubating Innovations

In acknowledging and attempting to bypass their own financial constraints, the novice CEE donors have worked to increase the impact of their democracy assistance without necessarily increasing their spending. They have done so by using external funding, either from veteran Western European or North American donors (including the EU), promoting intraregional donor coordination, helping set the agenda for international organizations already providing assistance, and developing creative, low-cost alternatives to traditional democracy assistance programs.

Some of the new, more cash-strapped EU members, such as Bulgaria and Estonia, resorted to channeling official development assistance and other resources of larger and more established Western donors to Tunisia and Egypt. This practice mirrors a solution to aid scarcity that has already been implemented in the post-Soviet space, where the United States and the CEE states share the financial burden of democracy assistance under the framework of the Emerging Donors Challenge Fund established by the U.S. State Department. This fund allows CEE countries to submit development project proposals to the U.S. State Department, which agrees to match the grants given by CEE countries on whichever projects it selects. So far, the United States and CEE countries—the latter via the International Visegrad Fund, part of an organization founded by the governments of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia to facilitate and promote cooperation among citizens and institutions in Central Europe—have both contributed \$3 million

toward projects implemented by CEE NGOs in countries such as Belarus and Moldova. The next round of proposals under the Emerging Donors Challenge Fund should include a recommendation to explore opportunities for involvement in the MENA region.

CEE donors often entice their larger counterparts to fund their projects by establishing new platforms for exchanging and developing networks. The Bulgarian Sofia Platform caught the attention of donors in Washington, as did the School of Politics, another Bulgarian scheme. The school benefits from both American and German funding secured to facilitate the sharing of transition know-how between CEE and MENA policymakers. Estonian authorities—together with the Estonian e-Governance Academy, which trains and advises in the use of information technology for furthering the democratic process—have attracted USAID financing to stimulate cooperation with Tunisian counterparts in “supporting the development of open governance and e-governance in Tunisia.”²⁷

Furthermore, CEE governments and NGOs are proactively exploring options for engagement in public-private initiatives, such as the German Marshall Fund’s MENA Partnership for Democracy and Development. This initiative was launched in December 2012 as an “international clearinghouse of service providers, donors, experts, and experienced practitioners” that various actors involved in the MENA transitions can draw upon as needed.²⁸

Most CEE donors have also begun making strategic use of international and regional organizations and forums to help set the agenda of the democracy assistance community devoted to the MENA region. They have focused primarily on the Community of Democracies, its virtual network Leaders Engaged in New Democracies, and the Visegrad Group.

The Community of Democracies’ mission, in particular, has been well received in the MENA region. The Tunisian ambassador to the United States, Faysal Gouia, noted that “the Community of Democracies is helping us understand what transition took; positive lessons as well as the mistakes made.” The Slovak government, for its part, agreed to co-chair the community’s Tunisia Task Force with the Netherlands. Originally interested in running the Community of Democracies’ Moldovan Task Force—now managed by the Poles—the Slovaks accepted the leadership of the Tunisia Task Force because they were keen on transcending their narrow regional specialization by “zooming out of the post-Soviet space,” a high-ranking diplomat confirmed off the record. The Slovak Ministries of Transport, Communications, and Public Works and of Construction and Regional Development are contributing to the task force’s ATLAS project, which is conducting an inventory of socioeconomic data from Tunisian governorates. The Ministry of Justice is heading a working group on judicial reform, and the Office of the Prime Minister is helping to manage the task force’s e-governance project.

CEE transition know-how and enthusiasm to pursue democracy assistance in MENA has also been harnessed by local branches of major international organizations, such as the UNDP, which has its regional European center in Bratislava, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, whose Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights is in Warsaw. This office engaged seasoned Polish elections experts to train election observers from Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt at both an October 2011 event in Budva, Montenegro, and the December 2011 Mediterranean Partner Countries' Civil Society Conference in Vilnius, Lithuania. The UNDP also contracted a Slovak parliamentarian and former deputy minister in 2012 to write a detailed report on lessons learned from public administration reform in Slovakia and other CEE states.

In the future, regional platforms could also play an important role in boosting CEE aid effectiveness and in helping to mitigate overlapping efforts and other redundancies in CEE democracy promotion efforts. The Visegrad Group held a meeting in late 2012 with the aim of hashing out a constructive plan for regional involvement in the MENA region, and it has intensified the dialogue surrounding democracy support in Tunisia and Egypt. “We have to talk to one another. Sometimes CEE governments act like they are participating in a beauty contest,” revealed a CEE diplomat who did not want to be quoted directly.

The Central European Development and Relief Organizations Network, a relatively new voluntary association of Central European NGOs, provides another opportunity for donor coordination. According to its short 2012 mission statement, the network seeks to create “synergies among . . . [NGO] activities in developing countries such as Afghanistan, Kenya, South Sudan, Burma, Haiti, and Moldova” in hopes that a common approach will provide “complex programs for more vulnerable people.”²⁹ Though Tunisia and Egypt are not yet at the forefront of the network's efforts, they are subjects of future discussions and will likely become priorities in the near future.

In addition to working with established donors and organizations, CEE countries have begun devising innovative tools for democracy support to deal with their limited fiscal capabilities as donors. One noteworthy example is the creation of “transition cookbooks.” The Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and other CEE states have been collecting and publishing edited volumes of texts and essays by veteran activists and reformist politicians. Included essays cover a number of topics, such as foundations of democracy; personal experiences of post-Communist transformation; accounts of reform processes related to public administration, lustration, the security apparatus, and privatization; and relations with the EU. These versatile publications tend to be collaborative projects between ministries of foreign affairs and leading NGOs in CEE countries.

MENA Reactions to CEE Involvement

Understanding local perceptions is critical to creating long-term partnerships between CEE donors and the civil societies of Tunisia, Egypt, and other MENA countries. It is also essential to the development of more demand-driven projects. Hence, in evaluating the impact of CEE democracy assistance, it is especially important to take into account the perceptions of local stakeholders—in this case, the recipients of CEE democracy assistance.

Tunisians and Egyptians who are in a position to gauge the contributions of CEE donors acknowledge the increased visibility of CEE countries in the region and their expanding roles in democracy assistance in the aftermath of the Arab Awakening. Most note that while they had no knowledge of CEE democracy assistance programs active during the prerevolutionary period, in the past few years they have witnessed the proliferation of such schemes. However, they also observe that CEE involvement in the MENA region remains dwarfed by that of traditional aid heavyweights such as the United States or the European Union.

This is a reoccurring but possibly misleading feature of assessments of Central and Eastern European democracy assistance: the implicit point of reference is often the performance of the United States and not donors of comparable size and resources. That the heavy lifting remains in the hands of established Western donors is hardly surprising. The responses of Tunisian and Egyptian interviewees, which suggest that the CEE contribution has been modest overall, indicate that MENA recipients may be assessing the donors' importance by placing the emphasis on the amount of funding committed.

Similarly, recipients do not tend to regard the heightened attention CEE countries have paid to MENA recently as exceptional because it mirrors a broader trend. In the postrevolutionary period, traditional bilateral democracy promoters and multilateral organizations have showered both Tunisia and Egypt with attempts to support democratization via conferences, workshops, and trainings. Offers of assistance have also come from other emerging players in the field of democracy support in the MENA region, such as Indonesia and South Africa.

Moving Beyond Conferences

Though recipients view CEE democracy assistance as relatively small in scale, their experiences with CEE governments and NGOs have been overwhelmingly positive. Recipients' testimonies usually contain a curious juxtaposition of general skepticism regarding the overall role of CEE countries in the MENA region and a personally positive appraisal of working directly with CEE actors. Conferences organized by CEE donors are deemed engaging and professional, and participants agree that they conveyed a number of important

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lessons. Similarly, there is a consensus that CEE-led workshops successfully targeted key stakeholders in recipients' societies. Professor Said Sadek, an Egyptian academic from the American University in Cairo who participated in the events overseen by Bulgaria's Sofia Platform, emphasized that CEE initiatives have helped build a real bridge among democracy activists in Central and Eastern Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East.

Although the overall feedback on the substance of CEE-led seminars is favorable, recipients also mention that the current scope of engagement is too narrow. Creating opportunities for dialogue at conferences and offering

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training at workshops is important and useful, but it falls short of localizing democracy assistance and building sustainable partnerships. Tunisian NGO leader Mouheb Garoui opined: "we don't want a good lunch or good coffee; we want something concrete." Garoui and others call for deeper involvement on the ground on the part of CEE actors as well as for more substantial funding for local NGOs and civil society groups. Moreover, recipients argue that more formalized follow-up mechanisms should foster ties created through seminars and workshops.

Logistically, recipients also contend that the permanent physical presence of CEE NGOs in Tunisia and Egypt alongside their U.S. or Western European counterparts would increase these new actors' capacity to develop meaningful relationships with local activists and wield a more direct impact on domestic democratization processes.

Tunisian and Egyptian stakeholders offer numerous explanations for the deficiencies of the current CEE approach to democracy assistance in their countries. They most often cite the lack of a permanent presence and scarce funding as the main factors responsible for the stunted CEE outreach. Recipients also point out that donor coordination among the various CEE countries is weak and that the democracy assistance enterprise in the MENA region lacks an overarching diplomatic and political strategy. Egyptian journalist, blogger, and democracy activist Wael Abbas insisted that CEE donors need more experience in North Africa and the Middle East to acquire a deeper understanding of the dynamics on the ground in order to identify the best partners to engage with and the right projects to back.

Obstacles to Expanding the Scope of Engagement

While the claim of regional inexperience on the part of CEE actors is true, it is not the only obstacle. Professor Sadek also blamed the underdevelopment of the CEE democratization enterprise on the unwillingness of local authorities to engage with the new donors, claiming that, "the government does not want real democracy assistance." Referring to the Muslim Brotherhood-led government in Egypt, Sadek explained that while the new authorities were eager to work with external parties on trade and economic development issues, they

were overall reluctant to accept external aid to implement democratization programs, such as those promoting security sector or political reform, maximizing internal checks and balances, or increasing the freedom of the press.

Reluctance on the recipients' end to follow up on CEE offers of assistance does place CEE countries in a difficult predicament, though it is hardly news—governments, international organizations, and NGOs interested in supporting democracy encountered similar difficulties under both Mubarak and Ben Ali. Now CEE newcomers, like their more seasoned Western counterparts, are discovering that they face an uneasy choice: accepting the local authorities' limits on their activities and risking becoming little more than a fig leaf for regimes of uncertain democratic commitment; or refusing to do so and jeopardizing their institutional access, which would in turn diminish their capacity to influence the political situation on the macro level and ultimately thwart their ability to maintain a presence on the ground.

But it is too soon to point fingers at recipient governments as the sole major obstacle to poorly directed aid. Donor risk aversion could also lurk behind the limitations of CEE democracy assistance. Using examples from Tunisia, Garoui reasoned that most CEE resources and funding seem to be channeled into highly institutionalized and established NGOs and civil society groups, which often happen to be located in the recipient country's capital. In pursuing this centralized approach, CEE states are mimicking the democracy assistance patterns of established donor entities, such as the European Union. However, as relative newcomers, they are in a unique position to take more risks than traditional donors and fill a vacuum by decentralizing their democracy assistance and reaching out to younger and less bureaucratic organizations with more novel approaches.

This point underscores another main theme raised by recipients of CEE aid: the high expectations for CEE countries' potential to act as a democratizing force in MENA. Tunisian and Egyptian activists tend to assert that Central European donors could play a crucial role in strengthening democracy and civil society in North Africa and the Middle East. Driving this assessment is the fact that CEE donors are perceived in a far more positive light than their seasoned North American or Western European counterparts. This comparative advantage stems from a fortunate package of structural and agency-based factors, mainly a lack of a colonial heritage and accidental linkages from the past, such as the university exchange programs that sent hundreds of North African and Middle Eastern nationals to the European part of the former Eastern bloc in the 1980s. As a result, their programs tend to be described as more neutral and their funding as less politicized. Recipients openly admit that accepting CEE funding poses fewer challenges than receiving financial assistance from the United States.

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The perceived neutrality of CEE motives is unfortunately counterbalanced by historical and sociocultural differences between CEE nations and the Arab Middle East. Gouia noted that many players, not just CEE countries, have relevant transition know-how and experience:

We have many great examples [of transition] that we could follow: Romania, South Africa. . . . But Tunisia is different because religion is always mixed up with politics. Turkey's experience and the secularization process under Kemal Ataturk might be relevant to us.

Mustapha Kamel Nabli, former governor of the Central Bank of Tunisia and senior adviser to the World Bank's chief economist, added that CEE transitions were, in a way, destined for success due to those countries' sense of belonging to Europe. "After the fall of the Berlin wall, there was a clear direction, a broad outline of where this all was going to go. . . . It was the case in Tunisia in 2011, but now we have gone off track."

Overall, local stakeholders in Egypt and Tunisia seem extremely receptive to experience sharing with these recent democratizers, and they express the belief that CEE experience is—to some degree—transferable to MENA. Tunisian interviewees propose a sort of à la carte approach—they are interested in implementing CEE lessons from reforms in the particular areas of transitional justice and the security sector over other types of CEE best practices. In Egypt, Abbas believed CEE NGOs could offer useful pointers on reforming the security sector, overhauling the interior ministry, and drafting the Egyptian constitution.

The analysis of recipients' perceptions of CEE efforts offers useful directions for the future. Interviewees stress the importance of investing in longer-term projects and fostering durable partnerships rather than organizing fleeting one-time encounters. Recipients express a desire to be partners, indicating that lessons could perhaps yield better results when packaged as exchanges or ongoing conversations.

The View From Central and Eastern Europe

Defying criticism suggesting that CEE actors are "stuck in their own paradigm," these donors seem sensitive to the fact that there is no universal model of transition and, in their own words, they shy away from preaching generalizable truths. Puchta, the Polish ambassador to Cairo, was adamant that CEE countries must focus "not on teaching but on sharing" experience that includes mistakes. Jan Latal from the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs seconded this sentiment:

Our projects focus on telling recipients what not to do rather than posing as an ideal type. In spite of great disparities between the CEE and MENA regions, there are some transition dynamics that we share—and there is genuine interest in debate about those. We also have a lot to say about the sequencing of reforms: constitution, elections, party financing, and transitional justice.

The emphasis on the equal importance of discussing successes and failures implies that CEE donors have come to understand the longevity and complexity of democratic consolidation, which is a process distinct from authoritarian extrication. Many new EU member states face lingering problems that are often traceable to the Communist legacy, including state capture, corruption, and “partocracy,” a de facto form of government where one or more political parties dominates the political process. Moreover, it is not uncommon for post-Communist democracies to go through regime cycles. After their EU accession in 2004, several CEE countries experienced populist and nationalist resurgences. Following the 2011 election in Hungary, the new government—according to a number of analysts—embarked on the path of democratic backsliding. Some of the long-term malaise is blamed on bad or ambiguous laws that were adopted early in the transition process. Lamenting rampant corruption among political parties in the Czech Republic, Marek Svoboda of the NGO People in Need argued:

It’s important to tell Tunisian and Egyptian drafters of the law on political parties that party financing is a crucial aspect of the bill and emphasize that if they forget to deal with it, here is what could happen and what did happen in our case in fifteen years.

Frequently, CEE interviewees stress the importance of their experience acting as much-needed reassurance to countries transitioning to democratic rule. Poland’s former ambassador to Tunisia, Krzysztof Olendzki, said, “The Tunisians were concerned that they were taking too long with the constitution writing. Well, the Poles told them that it took them seven years. They also bemoaned the proliferation of political parties. They had over a hundred, so did we.” The ultimate success of CEE transitions can offer tangible hope and, in the words of Puchta, send a “positive signal” that political change and democracy can take root within one generation, even if they do not emerge overnight.

Highlighting the usefulness of learning from successes as well as mistakes, Central and Eastern Europeans also readily admit that their lessons should be combined with those of other countries. Indonesians can talk to Tunisians and Egyptians about the coexistence of Islam and democracy; Argentineans and Turks can pass on lessons about stripping the military of the guardian role in the political process; Czechs and Slovaks can focus on explaining how they avoided civil war and settled on a velvet divorce. And CEE donors believe that beyond simply sharing their specific experience, they can also identify global good practices in several issue areas related to democratization, including civil society support, and serve as experts and communicators.

Fine-Tuning Cooperation With Former Western Teachers

CEE policymakers argue that their countries' comparative advantages, especially when harnessed by experienced aid donors in tested, multistakeholder coalitions, can help the international community exert more leverage on the reform process in democratizing nations such as Tunisia and Egypt. This argument is bolstered by the long and successful track record of CEE NGOs working in tandem with intergovernmental as well as nongovernmental organizations, including the UNDP, USAID, NED, the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe, the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, the Open Society Foundations, the German Marshall Fund, and the German Stiftungen (political foundations), some of which are currently helping the CEE newcomers tackle challenges related to their recently acquired donor status.

But working with more experienced donors is not without challenges. CEE activists tend to reiterate that the exact mode of cooperation has to be sophisticated, targeted, and crafted with extreme sensitivity to the political context in the MENA region. Financial arrangements are a particularly thorny issue. According to Svoboda of People in Need, “our involvement can just as easily provide American funding with credibility as it can deprive us of ours, which is something that happened to us while we were implementing a project financed via a U.S. grant in Northern Egypt.”

Equality with Western counterparts is also important to CEE donors. Olendzki mentioned a curious case of what he called the “Marriott brigades” in Poland to illustrate that Central and Eastern Europeans do not simply want to serve as researchers for bigger donors:

In the 1990s, there were [some] specialists from abroad staying at expensive hotels, who paid our own experts peanuts to deliver the substance for their reports and then gave advice to our governments based on that for a lot of money. We have to be in a partnership.

Pooling expertise—combining U.S. and EU theory with CEE practice, as well as practice from other regions—dividing tasks, being on equal terms, and employing common standards of impact evaluation could indeed be a way toward even greater donor coordination and hopefully more effective assistance. But the latter target, especially, is still a long shot, at least according to a high-ranking Slovak diplomat active in the Tunisia Task Force of the Community of Democracies, who noted that perceptions of donors and recipients often diverge: “In Washington, officials commend us for our efforts, while in Tunis, they often do not know what we are even doing.” Until those problems identified as obstacles to CEE aid by both donors and recipients are addressed, the goal of more effective assistance will remain elusive.

Creating a Lasting Impact

It is crucial for CEE states to carve out a distinctive and effective niche within the democracy support industry. They need to do so both to distinguish themselves from other countries active in MENA—many of which can also claim to have relevant transition experience, including Turkey and Brazil—and to ensure that their manifest good intentions translate over time into real impact. Being a recent graduate of the democratization process, valedictorian or not, does not necessarily predispose a CEE dissident, official, freedom fighter, or activist to be a successful aid actor.

To make their democracy assistance in the MENA region more effective, CEE states must first acknowledge that the type of aid they are offering is not always what MENA activists desire. These holes in the supply-demand chain of transition support likely lurk behind MENA perceptions that the CEE role has been marginal. In the postrevolutionary context of the Middle East, it is important to acknowledge that Tunisian and Egyptian governments, which are demonstrating increasing interest in strengthening central control and containing political opposition, seem far more reluctant to work on core democracy promotion programs than to develop trade and economic links. Yet this does not mean that CEE donors should give up on democracy assistance—on the contrary, they must seek targeted and creative ways of leveraging it.

Central and Eastern Europeans can adapt by emphasizing the governance side of their democracy portfolio. They can help, perhaps through more well-off counterparts in the donor community, develop working regulatory regimes to support emerging markets and strengthen transparency and accountability mechanisms. A transferrable lesson from the post-Communist transition that applies in MENA is that the sequencing and communication of reforms are just as important as their substance.

CEE governments and NGOs can also make an invaluable contribution by supporting local demand for good governance in the MENA region from the bottom up and from the top down. This can be achieved by helping Tunisian and Egyptian policymakers conduct consultations and perhaps establish steering committees for reform that would include a broad range of stakeholders from the domestic private sector, foreign investors, and civil society organizations, among others. In addition, CEE countries can advise MENA governments on how to design information campaigns that will keep their populations apprised during the process of reform implementation and build reform constituencies for tough times ahead.

CEE countries must also continue to flag the importance of civil society building as the primary transferable lesson from their own transitions. Most MENA countries have limited experience with political pluralism, party competition, and political activism. Broad opposition movements consisting of diverse groups initially brought together by a shared rejection of the ancien régime tend to dissolve quickly. Ideally, representative political parties and responsible civil society actors with a crucial role to play in the democratic system of checks and balances should arise from the chaos. Here, the Central Europeans' recollection of what it was like to create these entities out of the Solidarity movement in Poland or the Civic Forum that unified anti-authoritarian actors in the Czech part of Czechoslovakia would be instructive. As for long-term civil society building, the new donors can overcome their financial constraints and maximize their impact by reaching out to start-up, nonorthodox NGOs and civil society initiatives as well as to groups located in underserved, peripheral parts of Tunisia and Egypt.

More generally, CEE countries should also take full advantage of the value of open, peer-to-peer communication that can take place between actors with shared transition experiences. This dynamic allows CEE activists to offer reassurance to frustrated Middle East reformers and help them interpret and put to use transitional lessons, even if those lessons come from places other than Central and Eastern Europe. The CEE ability to serve as an intermediary between Middle Eastern activists and actors from Western Europe, North America, and elsewhere is evident. Geography, history, and the EU tie these nations to the West, but their recent political and economic transformation following the collapse of Communism bonds them to MENA countries even though historical, socioeconomic, and cultural differences between the two regions are far greater than those that CEE actors encounter when they work in the Western Balkans or the former Soviet republics that constitute the Commonwealth of Independent States.

MENA recipients seem to agree that the Central and Eastern Europeans have notable potential to contribute to democracy assistance in the region, mainly due to the fact that CEE actors enjoy greater legitimacy in this role

CEE countries must invest in greater visibility and presence on the ground through sustainable multiyear projects.

than their Western European and North American counterparts. To harness this legitimacy, CEE donors have to overcome their image problem of being perceived as inexperienced in and peripheral to the MENA context. To deflect attention from their thin official development assistance budgets, these states should highlight their know-how, innovativeness, solidarity, and, above all, their greater responsiveness—that is, learning through practice not theory. Moreover, CEE countries must invest, within reason, in greater visibility and presence on the ground through sustainable multiyear projects.

The political complexities of the attempted democratic transitions in the Middle East and North Africa today resist simplistic parallels with the experiences of Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s. But in the 1990s, leading “transitologists” analyzing the process of transformation from an authoritarian to a democratic regime were also unsure whether CEE states could learn from the experience of Southern Europe. Unsurprisingly, they found that even drawing intra-European analogies between Spain or Portugal and Poland or Czechoslovakia was difficult. And juxtaposing Southern and Eastern Europe was, as political scientist Valerie Bunce quipped, “comparing fruits to kangaroos.” But these complexities do not render the Central and Eastern European lessons useless for the Arab world. Experiences of political party development, inclusion of former regime actors, and European integration are instructive and can be applied in different contexts if donors make sure that they are thoughtfully adapted.

Figuring out how CEE states can make at least modest contributions at every step of the MENA countries’ journey toward greater stability, prosperity, and freedom is essential. Some lessons from CEE transitions will work, some will have to be adjusted rather substantially, and others will simply prove inapplicable. Central and Eastern Europeans will fulfill their aspiration to be actors of unique value in the attempted democratic transitions of North Africa and the Middle East if they are able to not only apply their own recent transitional expertise but also show that they understand better than others how the smart adaptation of lessons from one region to another is what makes any form of assistance truly valuable. Their initial burst of energy and activity in the MENA region since early 2011 is a start. Now they must demonstrate that they can play a deeper, lasting role in helping local democratic aspirants face the dilemmas of transition as they continue to unfold.

Notes

- 1 Unless otherwise stated, quotes and findings are based on personal conversations and interviews between the authors and various activists, politicians, and relevant actors in Central and Eastern Europe and the Middle East and North Africa held between 2011 and 2013.
- 2 See, for example, “Estonia, Egypt to Sign Accord on Cultural Cooperation,” Baltic News Service, May 5, 2004; “Lithuania Signs Cultural Cooperation Pact With Egypt, Starts Ties With Antigua, Barbuda,” Baltic News Service, September 24, 2004; “Egypt, Czech Republic Sign Cooperation Pact on Trade,” MENA News Agency (via BBC Summary of World Broadcasts), February 19, 2004; “Romanian Chamber of Commerce Concludes Trade Accord With Egypt,” BBC Monitoring Europe, May 3, 2006; “Slovenia, Egypt to Boost Transport Ties,” STA News Agency (via BBC Worldwide Monitoring), May 14, 2007; “Egypt, Hungary Sign Economic Cooperation Accord,” BBC Monitoring Middle East, September 21, 2007.
- 3 “Foreign Minister Mladenov: Events in Egypt Show Need for Serious Social, Economic Reforms,” BTA News Agency, via BBC Monitoring International Reports, January 31, 2011.
- 4 “Latvia Welcomes Democratic Change in Egypt—ForMin,” Baltic News Service, February 12, 2011.
- 5 See the Community of Democracies website, www.community-democracies.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1&Itemid=23.
- 6 “Lithuania Would Initiate Bid to Accept Egypt to Community of Democracies—ForMin,” Baltic News Service, February 14, 2011.
- 7 “Czech Republic May Help With Reforms,” Pravo website, via BBC Worldwide Monitoring, February 17, 2011.
- 8 “Slovakia Approves Projects to Support Democratization in Tunisia,” *Financial Times*, November 1, 2011.
- 9 Pawel Wronski, “Exporting Round Table to Maghreb—Walesa Goes to Africa,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, April 14, 2011 (via BBC Worldwide Monitoring, April 18, 2011).
- 10 Egyptian participants included representatives from the Ministries of Justice and Foreign Affairs and the judiciary branch as well as academics and journalists. Tunisian invitees included NGO leaders, journalists, and representatives from both the Higher Court for Independent Elections and the High Court for Achieving the Objectives of the Revolution, Political Reform and Transition to Democracy. See Bucharest Workshop on Democratic Transformations, “North Africa and Eastern Europe: Viewpoints and Shared Experiences of Transition—A Bridge Over 20 Years,” Bucharest, July 13–15, 2011, www.undp.ro/libraries/projects/ODA/Report_on_the_Bucharest_Workshop_on_democratic_transformations_July_2011.pdf.
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