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International development policies in Central and Eastern Europe since EU accession: increasing divergence?

Balázs Szent-Iványi[a,b] and Simon Lightfoot[c]

[a]Aston Centre for Europe, Aston University, Birmingham, UK; [b]Department of World Economy, Corvinus University Budapest, Budapest, Hungary; [c]POLIS, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK

ABSTRACT
The contribution discusses how the international development policies of four Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) evolved following their accession to the EU. The four states started these policies in the run-up to accession, driven by pressure from the EU. The policies put in place were underfunded and received little political attention, resulting in functionally similar approaches. In the past 10 years however, these policies began to diverge in practices and motivations. This paper provides a comparative analysis of the four policies, focusing on strategies, aid volumes and allocation. The analysis reveals that while Hungary's approach has diverged the most from the other three, all four are now developing distinct donor profiles. International development policy has become relatively politicized in Hungary and Poland, where governments have used it to promote economic nationalism, ideology and security goals, and have resisted socialization pressures arising from membership in the EU and the OECD's Development Assistance Committee. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia however, the policy had little political salience, leaving space for aid bureaucracies to shape it according to the norms promoted by these organizations.

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Introduction

Since their accession to the European Union (EU), the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia have often been studied as a bloc when it comes to their international development policies. They shared a similar journey after the fall of Communism, ceasing all meaningful international development activities as they themselves became recipients of official assistance. However, the adoption of the EU's *acquis* in the run-up to accession forced them to re-emerge as donors of foreign aid. A significant amount of literature has analysed these emerging policies, showing that they were functionally similar because of EU conditionality (see e.g. Horký-Hlucháň and Lightfoot 2013; Szent-Iványi and Lightfoot 2015). They all mimicked 'Western' models of international development (i.e. those promoted by the OECD's Development Assistance Committee or DAC[1]), but with low amounts of resources. All four countries emphasized that they possessed an important comparative advantage compared to Western donors, namely their transition experience, which made their assistance more relevant in regions undergoing similar transitions, especially in the post-Soviet space.

CONTACT Balázs Szent-Iványi b.szent-ivanyi@aston.ac.uk Aston Centre for Europe, Aston University, Aston Triangle, Birmingham B4 7ET, UK

This article aims to analyse the post-accession trajectories of the international development policies of the four states and explain the identified variations in them. The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia accounted for 70% of all official development assistance (ODA) provided by the eleven Central and Eastern European (CEE) EU member states in 2021 (OECD, 2022a). The four countries are often lumped together under the Visegrád Four umbrella, but increasing differences in their domestic and foreign politics (such as Hungary's illiberal politics and pro-Russia positions following Russia's invasion of Ukraine) have been causing tensions between them (Janebová and Hloušek 2023). These differences may have also led to diverging trajectories in their international development policies. By examining these policy trajectories, this paper aims to reveal insights about the role of the EU in shaping these policies. Given the role that the EU played in the creation of CEE international development policies, the 20-year anniversary of the 2004 enlargement is an opportune time to re-examine their trajectories.

To identify potential divergence, this paper analyses how international development strategies, as well as aid volumes and allocations, have changed in the four countries, using official documents and OECD DAC statistics. The key finding is that divergence between the four countries is indeed present. Hungary has diverged the most from the other three, with the government significantly increasing ODA and using it to support Hungarian business interests and the country's religious diplomacy. However, there are signs of unique donor profiles emerging in the other three states too. Poland allocates an increasing share of its assistance to the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood to combat Russian influence. The Czech Republic, and to a lesser extent Slovakia, have approximated their practices to the EU's and OECD DAC's ideals, which can be explained by the absence of a strong domestic political steer and the socialization effect of membership in the two organisations. Indeed, much of the divergence between international development policies in the four countries can be explained by shifts in their domestic and foreign politics, with a degree of higher-level political attention to the policies in Hungary and Poland in particular. The resulting 'politicisation' of international development policy in Hungary and Poland creates a sharp contrast with the more technocratic Czech and Slovak approaches.

The paper proceeds with a brief theoretical discussion of the drivers of international development policy, which shows how the interplay between domestic politics and the international norms of 'good donorship' shapes a state's development policy. This is followed by a presentation of the policies in the four countries after EU accession. The subsequent analysis is structured along the aspects of international development policies where we expect divergence to emerge: strategies, aid volumes and aid allocation. The paper then explains the emerging differences using insights from the theoretical discussion. It ends with brief conclusions, highlighting the competing pull of domestic interests versus international norms and the related socialization effects found in development policy.

Drivers of international development aid

Development aid involves moving money from taxpayers in one country to citizens beyond 'the water's edge' (Milner and Tingley 2015), to promote economic development and welfare of developing countries. It is distinct from humanitarian aid, which tends to focus on short-term crisis-response and relief. The literature on the drivers behind international development policies has argued that decisions on aid strategies, volumes, and allocation are impacted by the complex interactions of different interests within a donor country's political economy (Bermeo 2017). These interests can be linked to strategic foreign policy goals, security, trade/business, or moral considerations, reputational concerns, or domestic political-demographic issues (Hoeffler and Outram 2011; Regilme and Hodzi 2021). Each donor may have different interests, or may view their relative importance differently, leading to different approaches to international development and distinct donor profiles. For example, a donor which primarily uses aid to ensure strategic influence in its recipient will be less interested in actual development outcomes, and will allocate its aid to strategic partners who are not necessarily those most in need. Poverty-focused aid is more likely in the case of donors who are heavily impacted by various security-related spillovers linked to global poverty (Bermeo 2017). Reducing poverty is therefore seen as a tool to combat uncontrolled migration, terrorism, or the global impacts of ill health (Lis 2018). Historical factors (such as history as a colonial power), path dependency and peer effects also seem to influence these decisions (Fuchs, Dreher, and Nunnenkamp 2014).

Lancaster (2006) argues that the dynamics between domestic politics and international pressures combine to shape how and why donor governments give aid. Perceptions of what the 'national interest' is can change over time, driven by a number of factors, including domestic politics and changes in government (Tingley 2010), lobbying by domestic interest groups (Lundsgaarde 2012), the business cycle (Dabla-Norris, Minoiu, and Zanna 2015), geopolitical shocks (such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine), or socialization effects from membership in international organizations (de Felice 2015).

This final point is important, as when shaping their international development policy, states need to balance their foreign policy interests with the norms and obligations promoted by international organizations they are members in. Membership in the EU and the OECD DAC (which the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia have all joined) both come with requirements which influence state behaviour. EU membership, through processes of Europeanization, could lead to member states adopting similar ('European') norms and rules for their development policies (Orbie and Carbone 2016). Europeanization can happen through either conditionality or socialization (Sedelmeier 2011). Under the former, member states make conscious decisions about implementing EU norms, and will do so if the benefits of compliance exceed the costs. Such 'rational' adoption can be relatively quick. Socialization, by contrast, is a longer process and can happen in the absence of net benefits. By taking part in the EU's decision-making processes, officials gradually internalize norms and gain a conviction that these represent the only acceptable ways to act. Similarly, the OECD DAC also acts as a forum for socializing member states and 'has always played a normative role in defining how countries should come to think and shape their development programmes' (Verschaeve 2023). The DAC defines concepts and acts as a policy evaluator: member states agree to regular peer reviews which explicitly highlight non-compliance with the norms of good donorship.

Development policy is a shared parallel competence within the EU: member states retain their bilateral development policies, but the European Commission provides aid as well, and is also charged with coordinating the bilateral development activities of members. This coordination is based on non-binding instruments (Carbone 2008, 50), such as Council Conclusions, with weak enforcement mechanisms. The norms promoted in these are very similar to the norms promoted by the DAC. Whilst these are soft law, member states agree to them, which gives them moral and political weight and provide a useful tool against which actions and rhetoric can be judged (Carbone 2008). Given the similarity of the norms promoted by the two organizations, their socializing effects are difficult to disentangle.

Szent-Iványi and Lightfoot (2015) argue that the norms of the DAC and the EU constitute a 'global consensus on aid' (see also Swiss 2018). Three of the elements of this consensus are relevant for the purposes of the paper, as they focus on broader policy-level issues rather than more technical aspects. First, the strategic goals that donors set down in their international development strategies need to align with global development declarations, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which clearly make poverty reduction a central goal. The second norm concerns the amount of ODA a country gives. All EU donors have committed to devote 0.7% of their GNI to ODA (although CEE states had lower interim targets). Third, donors are expected to increase the share of bilateral aid allocated to least developed countries and countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.

We do not wish to imply that these norms are inherently 'good', and any national interests which lead to international development policies contradicting them are 'bad'. In fact, these (and other) norms have faced criticism, including from post-development perspectives which point out their underlying Euro-centric conceptualizations of development and poverty reduction (Horký-Hluchář 2015). The 0.7% target itself and how ODA is defined have also been contested (Hudson 2014, 131–2). But regardless of any normative perspectives, donor states 'sign up' to these norms by becoming members of the OECD DAC or by agreeing to EU Council Conclusions. Many donors frequently promise to implement these norms in various strategic and policy documents, and can thus be held accountable for these promises. Indeed, the norms are used by both the DAC and the EU to evaluate member state performance, and the 0.7% target has acted as a proxy to judge states' generosity and commitment to development for half a century.

Pressures to adopt these norms would ultimately result in the homogenization of development policies across member states. However, these pressures are moderated through domestic processes, institutions and normative structures. Thus, despite similar contexts of EU membership, divergence in international development policies is possible. Understanding these domestic political processes and structures regarding what is perceived to be the 'national interest' are therefore key. However, if there are weak or no domestic interests or structures, external norms may shape international development policies directly (Arel-Bundock, Atkinson, and Potter 2015).

Data and methods

We analyse the evolution and potential divergence of the international development policies of the four countries along the three dimensions of the global consensus on aid: strategies, aid volumes and aid allocation. The analysis of strategic directions is primarily based on the latest strategic documents on development cooperation published by the four governments: the Development Cooperation Strategy of the Czech Republic 2018–2030 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, 2017); the Hungarian Government's International Development Cooperation Strategy for 2020–2025 (Government of Hungary 2019); the Multiannual Programme for Development Cooperation for 2021–2030 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland 2021); and the Medium-term Strategy for Development Cooperation of the Slovak Republic 2019–2023 (Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic 2018). All four strategies are available on the websites of the respective foreign ministries and/or aid agencies. We extracted the main goals and from each strategy and have placed these into a broader context by examining the institutional changes which have been put in place by governments to support progress towards these priorities.

The analysis of aid volumes and allocation in the four countries aims to identify potentially differing trajectories. Data on aid was taken from the OECD DAC's online databases (OECD 2022a, 2022b). There is a data lag in OECD reporting, thus the formal analysis ends with 2021, although more recent trends are mentioned where the data exists.

International development policies after accession

Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland all had international development policies during the Communist period, however, these were suspended after 1989. Pressure from the EU in (re)-launching these policies after the turn of Millennium was important, but given the soft law nature of the *acquis* in the field, the EU only provided guidance on what the policies should look like (Timofejevs Henriksson 2015). Nonetheless, with EU accession, the four countries agreed to create policies aligning with the global consensus on aid discussed above. They committed to increase their aid, initially to reach 0.33% of GNI by 2015 with a view to eventually progressing to the 0.7% target (up from below 0.1% in 2004); they also agreed to align with global and EU agendas around poverty reduction; and to focus their assistance on the poorest countries and those in Sub-Saharan Africa. The four countries joined the OECD DAC between 2013 and 2016, which provided socialization opportunities along very similar norms, to complement those stemming from EU membership.

The four CEE countries paid lip service to these norms, but did little to actually adopt them (Orbie and Lightfoot 2017). After some initial increase, ODA spending remained flat between 2004 and

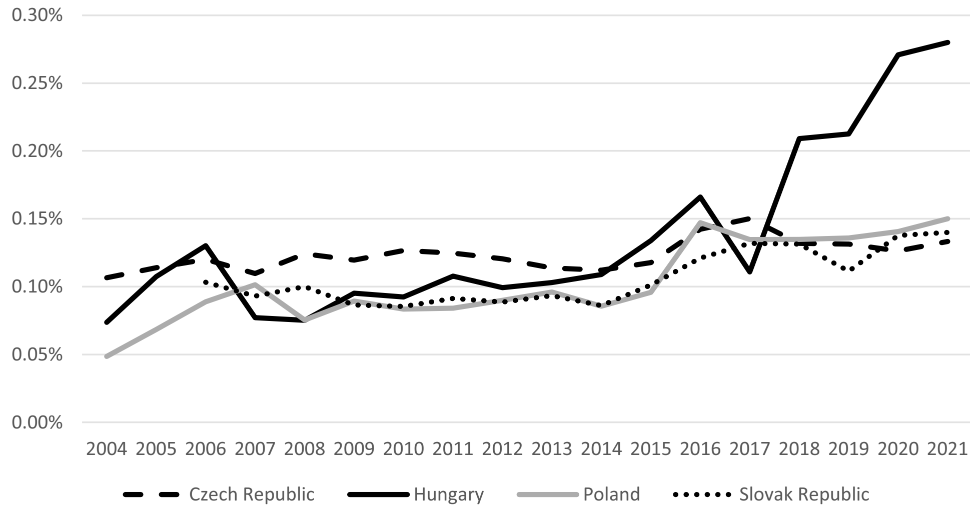

Figure 1. Official development assistance as share of GNI, 2004–2021. Source: authors, based on OECD (2022a).

2014, and the four countries did not even come close to reaching 0.33% by 2015 (see Figure 1).[2] The four states talked about the importance of effective aid donorship, but did not create strong institutional structures which would have embedded these in their practices (Lightfoot and Szent-Iványi 2014). They focused the majority of their ODA in their neighbourhood, especially the Western Balkans and the post-Soviet region, emphasizing that they possessed a comparative advantage compared to other donors here, namely the experience they had gained during their dual transitions from autocracy and planned economies to democratic and liberal market economies. Sharing this experience and promoting democracy, democratic governance and economic reforms emerged as a key characteristic of their policies (Horký 2012), and they argued that this was in-line with the EU's attempts to promote a division of labour among donors. That said, all four countries engaged with at least one least developed country (LDC) in Africa, and they all took part in rebuilding Afghanistan after the US-led invasion in 2001.

Overall, the international development policies of the four states were more similar to each other than they were to any other donors. Their ODA/GNI levels were relatively similar and considerably lower than for established donors. Their regional allocation patterns did differ, but these were again much more similar to each other than they were to other donors, given a high share of aid to European countries, the low share to Sub-Saharan Africa, and the focus on Afghanistan. International development policy was viewed as a technical and 'depoliticized' issue area, which rarely entered political discourses (Horký-Hlucháň 2015).

Diverging policies?

Current strategic goals

The Czech, Polish and Slovak strategies share very similar structures, discussing vision, principles and points of reference, objectives, territorial and sectoral priorities, policy tools and implementation. The Hungarian strategy, however, is considerably shorter than the other three and follows a completely different structure around five 'pillars'. Nonetheless, all four link their priorities to the SDGs and various EU strategic documents, and all reiterate previous pledges of reaching the 0.33% aid target.

Despite the similarities, the differences are apparent. Hungary's strategy stands out in five ways. First, the strategy is the least anchored in the SDGs: while the other three countries explicitly link each of their priorities to specific goals, Hungary is much vaguer. Second, Hungary perhaps goes the furthest in outright emphasizing the 'selfish' goals it has with its international development policy: creating export possibilities for Hungarian firms is one of the five pillars of the strategy. Poland also mentions this, albeit less visibly, while the Czech Republic and Slovakia only talk about the involvement of their private sectors as ways to increase resources available for global development. Third, Hungary heavily emphasizes support to religious minorities in the developing world, specifically Christian communities which it sees as being persecuted (see Paragi 2023). While similar issues are mentioned in Poland's strategy, Hungary has even created a dedicated programme in 2017, Hungary Helps, specifically to channel support to Christian communities in the Global South. Fourth, Hungary is the only country not to mention policy coherence for development, while the other three at least make promises regarding it (Poland) or discuss how they promote it (Czech Republic and Slovakia). Fifth, Hungary does not mention the promotion of gender equality at all, while it is a cross-cutting priority for the other three countries (although Poland uses the term 'equality between men and women').

While Hungary's strategy is an outlier, there are other differences between the four countries as well. These are especially visible in terms of how they approach the transfer of transition experience and democracy promotion. As discussed, this was seen as the region's comparative advantage in international development following EU accession. Transition experience is not mentioned at all in the strategies of Hungary and Poland. Neither of the two mention supporting democracy either, rather just good governance (Poland) and stable institutions (Hungary). Hungary does not even claim that its efforts contribute to SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). While democracy promotion have never been central in Hungary's international development policy, the shift seems very dramatic for Poland, which has positioned itself as a 'champion of democracy', especially in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood (Petrova 2012). Instead of working with democracy promotion NGOs, Poland increasingly provides grants to NGOs which espouse conservative values regardless of their previous experience in democracy promotion, and also implements an increasing share of its budget directly (Petrova and Pospieszna 2021, 536–537).

Transition experience, however, is central to Slovakia (mentioned 19 times in its strategy; see also Profant 2019), and also plays a prominent role for the Czech Republic, which claims that its transfer is what guides its choice in sectors of cooperation. The Czech Republic vowed to continue its Transformation Cooperation Programme, which it launched in 2005 as the main tool to transfer experience to recipient countries.

The Czech Republic's strategy gives the strongest impression of a donor which has embraced the EU's and the OECD DAC's norms, something acknowledged in the recent DAC peer review as well (OECD 2023b). Its strategy includes references to all key principles of mainstream development cooperation. While Poland and Hungary also reference key EU strategies, the Czech Republic goes beyond vague statements and discusses specific EU norms and practices that it has adopted or aims to adopt, including joint programming and donor coordination. Furthermore, the Czech strategy emphasizes monitoring and evaluation, and the country is the only one among the four to regularly carry out and publish evaluations of its activities. Slovakia's strategy is similar to the Czech Republic's, and gives similar impressions regarding the adoption of internationally agreed norms. It also emphasizes specific norms from which it has adopted, such as joint programming. The Czech and Slovak strategies hint at the possibility of EU/DAC influence the most.

The divergence visible in the strategies is also supported by evidence around the preferences, which the four countries attempt to upload to the EU's agenda. Following their EU accession, the four countries primarily focused on influencing EU development policy on three closely linked issues: acknowledging the value of CEE transition experience, ring-fencing funding for CEE project implementers, and increasing EU resources for the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood (Szent-Iványi and Lightfoot 2015, 92). Transition experience was positioned as the region's unique comparative advantage, which would add value to the EU's development projects in transition countries. Prioritizing CEE transition experience would also allow NGOs, state agencies and other actors from the region to compete for EU development grants and contracts on a more equal footing with large and experienced Western actors. Joint lobbying on this was frequent and became most visible in a non-paper published in 2011 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, 2011), which called on the EU to 'develop a systemic approach towards using transition experience in external relations'. More recently, however, this unified front seems to have wavered. As discussed, transition experience is no longer as central for all four countries as previously, and no other topic has quite taken its place. Furthermore, instead of attempting to shape EU development policy, some of the CEE countries have rather emerged as blockers. Hungary and Poland have used their veto threats in development policy to extract concessions in other policy areas (something explicitly noted in Hungary's DAC peer review, see OECD 2023b), especially around releasing funds to them withheld over rule of law concerns. Both countries have held up the signing of the recent Samoa Agreement between the EU and the Organization of African, Caribbean and Pacific States, with Hungary especially taking issue over references in the agreement to legal migration (Chadwick 2023) and sexual reproductive rights (Carbone 2024). Policy uploading has therefore shifted from a relatively constructive and joint-up effort of the four countries to more negative, individual initiatives focused on blocking.

Aid volumes and allocation

Aid volumes have slowly been creeping up in all four countries as a share of GNI, especially since 2015, but for the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia, they remain far from the 0.33% target (Figure 1). The challenge of meeting aid targets is seen across the DAC membership, so the three states are not unique. Hungary's spending has, however, jumped significantly after 2018. In 2021, Hungary spent 0.28% of its GNI on ODA, making it the only country among the four to come close to the 0.33% target. The country more than tripled its bilateral aid spending in 2018, from $41 million to $126 million. This was further doubled by 2021 to $250 million, with the bilateral share of Hungary's ODA increasing from 26% in 2017 – 58% in 2021 (OECD 2022a). There was no similar shift towards greater bilateral aid in any of the other three countries, where its share remained around a quarter of the total ODA in 2020.

The four countries have focused most of their ODA on European countries, in the Western Balkans and the post-Soviet space since 2004. However, the regional allocation patterns of ODA show evidence of recent divergence here as well. The panels of Figure 2 detail how the allocations of the four countries have shifted between 2004 and 2021 among major aid receiving regions. To smooth out annual fluctuations in ODA, often driven by single larger projects, data have been averaged across three-year periods. The share of European recipients has remained rather constant in Czech ODA, between 20 and 30%. There has been a steady shift away from Asia as the country wound down its role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan (Horký-Hlucháň and Szent-Iványi 2015), towards partners in Africa and the Middle East. Although Hungary spends larger absolute amounts in Sub-Saharan Africa, the region's share in bilateral ODA is the largest in the case of the Czech Republic. The Czech Republic's aid allocation practice has moved towards the recommendations of the EU and the DAC to focus more on LDCs (OECD, 2023a).

In Poland by contrast, we see a marked increase in the share of bilateral aid received by European partners, rising from 29% in 2004–06 to almost 60% in 2020–21 (OECD, 2022b). This has mostly been driven by increases in aid to Ukraine, which has accounted for a third of Polish bilateral ODA in 2021. Due to Russia's 2022 invasion, the potentially serious implications of Russian victory on Poland's security, and the costs of hosting Ukrainian refugees, this share is likely to grow even further in the coming years, cementing Poland's focus on the EU's East. Poland also took a role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan (Stępień 2017), which, together with assistance to China, accounted for the high share of Asian countries between 2007 and 2013.

The Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa have become increasingly important in Hungary's aid allocation, especially following the 2015 refugee crisis and the launch of Hungary Helps. However,

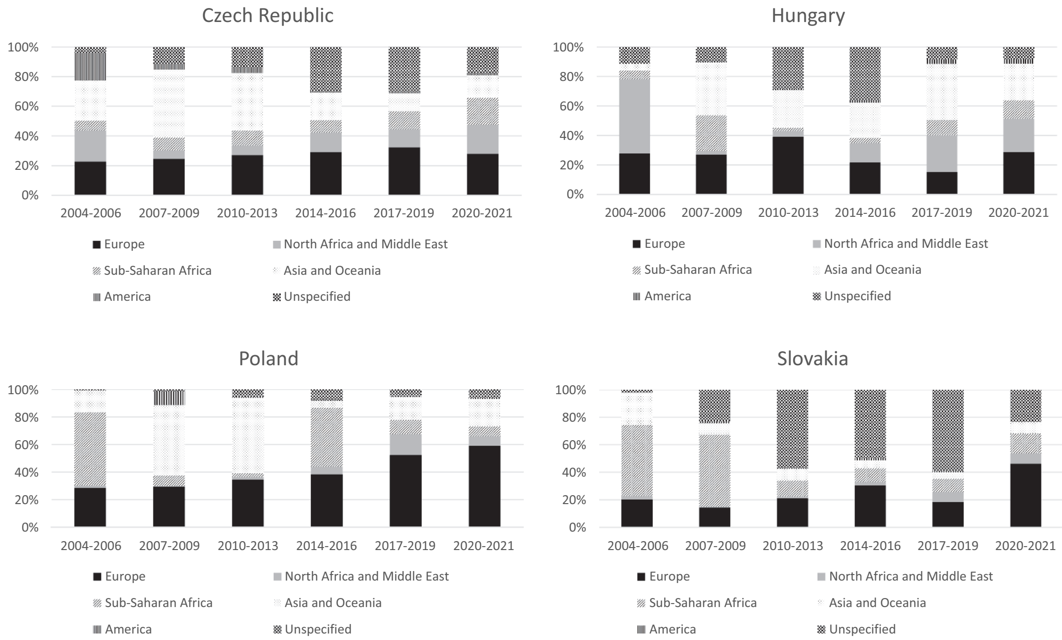

Figure 2. Regional allocation of aid for Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, 2004–2021 (in percentages). Source: authors, based on OECD (2022b).

European recipients remain important, mostly Serbia and Ukraine due to their sizable Hungarian minorities. In Slovakia's case, Africa played a big role early on, and even until 2021 much of the country's bilateral ODA was distributed to a variety of African LDCs. In 2021, this perceived geographical fragmentation was tackled and the government removed the regional approach to Sub-Saharan Africa (Kaba 2021). Slovak aid has therefore shifted towards Europe, which raises questions about the country's commitment to poverty eradication. Furthermore, the geographical allocation is 'unspecified' for significant shares of Slovakia's bilateral aid. This includes administrative costs and the costs of hosting refugees. These expenses are proportionately smaller for the other three countries due to their larger bilateral aid programmes.

Explaining divergence

The shifts in the four countries show that their approaches to international development are diverging, with increasingly distinct donor profiles emerging, especially in the case of Hungary. Some of these changes are coherent with the norms of the global consensus on aid, but many are not. A key question from the analysis of the strategies and aid spending of the four countries is what explains their divergence, and what role the EU played in it.

Hungary has diverged most from the other three countries, which is evident more broadly in Hungarian foreign policy. Viktor Orbán's populist/illiberal regime has aimed to reduce economic and political dependence on Western Europe and to make Hungary a more autonomous actor (Sebők and Simons 2022). Part of this economic-nationalist policy was the 'Global Opening' strategy introduced in 2011, which was meant to promote trade and investment ties with the Global East and South (Tarrósy and Vörös 2020). Hungary has cultivated close links with China, Turkey, and Russia, seen as rising powers which provide economic opportunities and thus need to be engaged 'pragmatically' (Buzogány 2017). Hungary has maintained close ties with Russia even after its invasion of Ukraine. Between 2011 and 2015, it increased its number of embassies in Africa and

South America and the frequency of high-level trade visits to emerging economies. To develop its soft power, Hungary launched a massive scholarship programme in 2013, *Stipendium Hungaricum*, which offers around 5,000 places each year to study in Hungary (Császár et al. 2023); in 2021, these accounted for 27.3% of bilateral ODA. Hungary has also boosted its programme of tied aid credits, 'a unique combination of development aid and export promotion' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary, n.d..).

Since coming to power in 2010, the government has been locked in constant battles with the EU over the rule of law (Kelemen and Pech 2019), and has waged an intense rhetorical war against everything coming from 'Brussels'. This is visible in international development policy as well. After the 2015 refugee crisis, Hungary emerged as the most vocal critic of migration to Europe, closing its borders and heavily securitising the issue (Thorleifsson 2017). To strengthen its anti-migrant rhetoric, the government began using ODA to address the root causes of migration. This was not necessarily driven by any belief that aid from Hungary could make a significant difference in the number of migrants and refugees, but rather by the need to visibly signal its position both domestically and internationally. This led to the creation of Hungary Helps, specifically aimed to support Christian communities in conflict zones. The emphasis on Christians is linked closely to the Hungarian government's nativist identity politics and religious diplomacy (Ádám and Bozóki 2016). However, this policy discriminates between recipients based on their religion, which contradicts EU and OECD DAC norms.

Hungary's embrace of ODA as a foreign policy tool and thus divergence from the other three countries can therefore be explained by the government's economic nationalism, as well as the need to visibly signal its position on migration and identity politics. While increasing ODA and spending more of it in conflict zones and LDCs may superficially be seen as alignment with the global consensus on aid, it is actually driven by very different motivations than a need to reduce global poverty. Despite superficial alignment, much of Hungary's policy is diametrically opposed to the EU's *acquis* and DAC norms, as noted by the OECD DAC (2023).

Between 2015 and 2023, during the rule of the right-wing coalition led by the Law and Justice Party, democracy in Poland has also turned towards a more populist direction. Law and Justice, which similarly to Orbán, has espoused economic nationalism and conservative social values (Naczyk 2022), but also an anti-Russian ideology, aimed to break Poland's post-1989 trajectory, viewing the country's transition process as incomplete (Folvarčný and Kopeček 2020). It accordingly declared a radical break with its predecessors' foreign policies, but Poland's international development policy has seen both continuity and change.

Poland has continued to provide much of its aid to countries in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood, especially Ukraine and Belarus; in fact, their share of total ODA has even increased since Law and Justice came to power (Szynol 2022). Significant portions of these resources continued to promote democratic transition and consolidation, which seems at odds with Poland's domestic democratic decline. As pointed out by Petrova and Pospieszna (2021) however, this was not driven by any intrinsic belief in democracy, but rather an instrumental conviction that this support would weaken Russian influence in the region and thus further Polish security interests. Law and Justice has amplified Polish society's mistrust towards Russia, portraying Poland as the victim of Russian aggression (Cadier and Szulecki 2022). Accordingly, it has changed the nature of Polish democracy aid to reflect this more instrumental understanding of democracy promotion: instead of NGOs, it is now mainly implemented by state organs and conservative organizations close to the government (Petrova and Pospieszna 2021). This is in-line with the Polish government's broader desire to create a new, pro-government NGO elite (Korolczuk 2022). Polish aid has also become less 'political': as discussed, Poland's Multiannual Programme for Development Cooperation for 2021–2030 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland 2021) does not mention democracy promotion, and instead focuses on more technical topics such as state-building and governance. There have also been some initiatives to use aid to further business interests and to reduce migration, but these have not become central themes in Polish international development policy (Szent-Iványi and Kugiel 2020).

Poland has had a similarly conflictual relationship with the EU as Hungary, as evidenced by the long-running rule of law debate, which means that it may have similarly resisted socialization effects. Nonetheless, it has not gone as far as Hungary: the Multiannual Programme for Development Cooperation for 2021–2030 adapts mainstream development language and at least pays lip service to many of the key principles of the EU and the global consensus on aid, but according to the OECD, this has little impact on practice (OECD 2023c). Although Poland has also emphasized the need to support Christian communities, it makes less blatant use of discriminatory aid practices than Hungary. While Hungary's right-wing government saw its foreign policy interests in diversifying economic relations away from Europe and using aid for religious diplomacy, Poland's government, driven by the need to contain Russian influence, began to increase the share of its assistance going to the EU's East. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this focus will only increase further, and the change in Poland's government in late 2023 to a coalition led by the centrist Civic Platform is unlikely to alter it. These strong security interests are likely to have overridden any external pressures from the EU or the DAC.

The Czech Republic is the donor from the region that most resembles the ideals of the global consensus on aid (OECD 2023a). Czech aid has gradually moved away from the Eastern Neighbourhood, and the share of aid provided to Africa (and especially the Sahel) has increased. The Czech Republic has the closest ties with Africa out of all the CEE countries (Horký-Hlucháň, Daniel, and Ditrych 2021). While Czech ODA to LDCs is still relatively small (Kovářová 2021), it is the highest among the four countries and growing, showing an increasing commitment to poverty reduction. Russia's invasion of Ukraine will refocus Czech ODA to Europe, but the country's position as the most committed to Africa among the four is unlikely to change. The Czech Republic rewards countries with sound governance by giving more ODA, where aid is likely to be more effective (Opršal et al. 2021). It is the only country out of the four to take the evaluation of its practice seriously, fostering a 'positive culture of learning' (OECD 2016, 20). Nonetheless, the country has not seen any substantial increase in its ODA.

There are two reasons for Czech alignment: the country's broader commitment to the West and liberal values, and a general political neglect towards international development. There has been no populist/illiberal turn in the Czech Republic, as in Hungary and Poland. 'European Internationalism' has been the preferred direction of Czech political parties (Hloušek and Kaniok 2021), and the country has made efforts in other areas to align itself with the West. There has also been a desire to distinguish itself from other countries in the region, most notably Hungary and Poland (Janebová and Hloušek 2023). Opršal et al. (2021) argue there are no significant fluctuations in Czech aid volumes, suggesting that ODA is not influenced by the ideology of the ruling party or coalition. According to them, this should be seen as a consequence of the 'little attention paid to development [. . .] by decision-makers'. The lack of political attention, however, means that other influential players have emerged to shape the policy. The Czech Republic has the region's strongest NGO, People in Need. People in Need has been highly successful in winning EU development funding, and has also been effective in pushing the government to adopt EU norms (Szent-Iványi and Lightfoot 2015, 140). The lack of political attention to international development meant that such non-governmental influence, coupled with the autonomy of technocratic experts working on international development, were able to shape the policy.

Arel-Bundock et al. (2015) argue that where a government agency has relative independence in its development policy decisions, i.e. there is no higher level political direction, 'ODA flows better match development ends'. This is exactly what we see in the Czech case: the 'pull' of EU and OECD norms and the impact of domestic actors were able to shape those aspects of development policy where political attention was weak.

We see a similar experience in Slovakia, where due to a lack of domestic political attention, there has also been some move towards adapting EU and OECD DAC norms. The OECD (2019) has noted that the 'Slovak Republic is an active global actor' and a 'valuable development co-operation partner'. However, Slovakia has not gone as far as the Czech Republic. Relatively richer countries receive more aid from Slovakia: Jančovič and Szabó (2022) highlight that Slovakia tends to allocate more ODA to the recipient countries undergoing the process of transition. These tend to be in its relative geographic proximity. The increased focus on Moldova and especially Ukraine after 2020 (see Figure 2) suggests a wider strategic foreign policy focus on the Eastern neighbours of Slovakia, with ODA following. On the ground presence is important, thus aid is generally allocated to countries with Slovak embassies; this has, however, been impacted by cost-saving measures, such as the closure of the embassy in Ethiopia in 2021 (Kaba 2021). Slovakia tends to provide more aid to recipient countries with better human development outcomes, but the focus on recipient needs seems to be weak (Jančovič and Szabó 2022).

There are several factors which indicate low levels of political attention. Financing for ODA remains low, and so does the bilateral aid share (Kaba 2021). There is a lack of consistent planning and resources are fragmented among too many partners. Furthermore, international development rarely ever comes up in parliamentary debates: according to parliamentary records, it was only mentioned seven times between 2016 and 2022.[3] There may have been a similar 'default' to the EU and DAC norms as in the case of the Czech Republic. Mravcová and Havlík (2022) found a high level of pragmatism in Slovakia's EU policy, and foreign policy debates in the parliament lack a left-right ideological dimension (Onderco and Joosen 2021). There is also an argument that Slovakia is a status seeker in international organizations (Graef 2024). All this increases the willingness of officials to positively engage with global norms. However, there were no strong domestic interest groups, such as a powerful NGO, pushing for change, which can explain why Slovakia has not gone as far as the Czech Republic has in aligning with EU and OECD DAC norms. However, this *status quo* in Slovakia is fragile, especially since the increasingly EU-sceptic populist Robert Fico returned to power in late 2023. While it is unlikely that his government would politicize international development, the country's generally pro-EU stance may shift.

Conclusions

This paper aimed to identify the post-EU-accession trajectories of international development policies in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, and explain their divergence. These policies followed relatively similar trajectories immediately after 2004: they were under-funded with a rhetorical focus on the transfer of transition experience, mainly to countries in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood. However, divergence has become evident more recently, with distinct donor profiles emerging. Hungary has significantly increased its ODA and is now the largest bilateral donor among the four, focusing on promoting exports and supporting persecuted Christian minorities. Poland has shifted its policy even more strongly towards the countries of the former Soviet Union and especially Ukraine, driven by security motivations. In both cases, the political considerations of using aid as a policy tool to promote economic nationalism, ideology and security concerns have been apparent. This overt politicisation of aid therefore outweighs the pull of EU or OECD DAC norms. Hungary's support for persecuted Christians even openly contradicts these norms by discriminating against recipients based on their religion. International development policy has not enjoyed similar degrees of political attention in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and has remained more on a technocratic level. This has given officials the space to shape policy choices, and allowed the socialization effects of EU and DAC membership to have an impact. Especially in the Czech Republic, this has created a system, which is increasingly aligned with the norms of the global consensus on aid.

International development policies are shaped by a number of factors; pressures from the EU or the OECD DAC to adopt various norms are but one source of influence (Zajaczkowski and Smolaga 2023). These pressures, however, are not particularly strong and are unable to counter domestic preferences that point in different directions. Previous research has highlighted the shallow impact of European integration on member state development policies, which has often been explained by the weakness of the *acquis* in this space. This is, however, not the full picture.

As the cases of the Czech Republic and to a lesser extent Slovakia show, socialization and adopting norms happens in cases where the broader environment is conducive in terms of a commitment to European and liberal values, but there is little political attention on international development per se. This allows aid bureaucracies and other actors, such as NGOs, to push for adopting international norms. However, the lack of political attention also means that this socialization can only ever be partial, as shown by only limited increases in overall ODA volumes. No socialization, however, will happen if the broader political context resists European norms in general, and government interests emerge around international development and politicize it, as in Hungary and Poland. These findings refine our understanding of the domestic impact of international norms, and show how much domestic political visions, priorities and the broader environment matter, in comparison to the socialization effects of international organization membership.

Notes

1. The DAC, established in 1960, serves as a forum for policy coordination and peer learning for 'Western' donors.
2. To note, very few older member states made any efforts either to reach their higher ODA target of 0.7% (Carey and Desai 2023).
3. We are very grateful to Ivica Petrikova for supplying this detailed information. Correspondence dated 09/06/2023.

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