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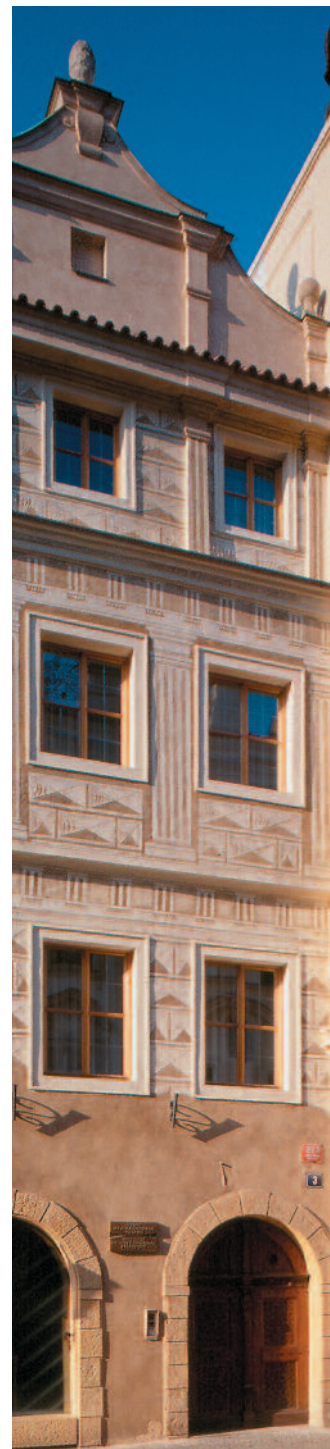
# Transition Experience 2.0: A new way to close the gap between the Central European human rights and development policies

## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

After twenty-five years of independent foreign policy making, the Central European countries must rethink their post-communist experience. The Transition Experience 2.0 narrative links the relatively successful development of the region not only to the political rights gained after 1989 but also to the social rights inherited from the socialist era.

The application of Transition Experience 2.0 can mobilise the limited foreign aid resources by enlarging the scope of the supported human rights groups abroad to social and environmental movements as well as by applying the rights-based approach to their development cooperation programmes and emphasizing their political dimension.

Further impacts can be achieved by coordinating strategies and applying one public diplomacy brand to human rights and development policies without merging them and by using Transition Experience 2.0 as a starting point for a serious discussion on policy coherence for development.



# Introduction: What is the global message of Central Europe 25 years after 1989?

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The 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of the Iron Curtain is a good opportunity for a reflection on the recent history of the Central Europe countries and their global presence. The last twenty-five years saw the sudden dissolution of their foreign aid under the umbrella of the Soviet-dominated Council for Mutual Economic Assistance as well as its reconstruction and alignment to the current models led by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and the European Union. Nowadays, the Central European donors are even becoming members of the OECD Development Assistance Committee, which attests that their institutions for providing foreign aid meet the minimal standards of the experienced Western donors. However, their aid volumes have remained negligible at the European as well as the global level, which lead the Central European governments to focus on the quality instead of the quantity of their aid and forward the transfer of their transition experience as their main added value.

By using the aid effectiveness argument, these governments have built their rhetoric in the global development arena on their unique experiences of transitions from authoritarian to democratic regimes, and from centrally planned to free market economies. Some minor bilateral policy instruments for the transfer of their specific transition experiences were already created. However, they still make up only a small part of their projects in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, and they are absent in their projects in Africa, Asia and Latin America. So far, the implementation of the European Transition Compendium, an address book of the transition experience initiated by the European Commission, has also been quite a disappointment.

Moreover, in the Visegrád Group that gathers together Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia, both the economic and social aspects of the transitions remain relatively isolated from the political transitions, and they are often implemented by two different tools – development cooperation, and human rights and democratization policy.

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While the Polish development cooperation has been traditionally focused on the support of the civil society, it founded a separate International

Solidarity Fund in 2011. Slovakia also created its Centre for Experience Transfer in Integration and Reforms (CETIR) in the same year. But only Hungary has supported the activities of its individual non-governmental organizations without creating parallel institutions. The cleavage between the social-economic and political areas is perhaps the strongest in the Czech Republic, where the so-called transition policy and devel-

opment cooperation developed independently much earlier. Therefore, this analysis is based mostly on the Czech example but it is still highly relevant for the other Central European countries and, more specifically, the Visegrád Group and its Visegrád Fund.

The goal of this paper is to propose a new narrative for the post-communist Central Europe called Transition Experience 2.0. The case for an upgraded version of the Central European transition history is that the dominant interpretation of the transition experience is one-sided and reductive. Indeed, the success of the post-communist countries that have become donors, which is seen as a proof of their belonging to the materially rich Global North, is based on the largely shared assumption that political freedoms are a necessary if not a sufficient condition for social and economic development. Yet the social and economic achievements during the socialist period that served as a base for the political emancipation are generally disregarded. A critical reflection of the changes that occurred in 1989, the year we are now commemorating, can help the Central European governments narrow the gap between their human rights and development policies.

So far the post-communist countries have intentionally promoted political and civil rights as the primary if not the only important group of human rights while they marginalised their rhetorical support for social, economic and environmental rights worldwide. And in turn, they left the realms of social, economic and environ-

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mental rights and obligations to the seemingly technical development cooperation, in which they were completely disconnected from the political dialogue with and democratization of the partner countries. Sometimes, they have even supplied authoritarian governments with development aid. This gap in coordination and complementarity is unsustainable. The policy areas of human rights and development should not merge but they should move towards each other in two ways: by enlarging the scope of human rights and by systematically introducing the rights perspective in the development cooperation. This double movement would bring Central Europe and the Visegrád Group more coherent foreign policies internally and externally. Also, implementing the new spirit of Transition Experience 2.0 would eventually benefit the poor and disempowered of the global South, including those of the former Eastern bloc that did not benefit from the fall of the Iron Curtain.

# The post-communist experience revisited: relinking politics, economics, society and the environment

History is written by the victors. The experience of the dissidents fighting communism in the relatively egalitarian socialist countries without substantial pockets of poverty has led them to put their accent on claiming civic and political rights to a different extent. Most Czech intellectuals considered the relatively high quality of public services and social safety nets provided by the socialist state as natural. The Solidarity movement in Poland originated as a trade union with a predominantly social agenda, but it gradually moved towards political demands. The Slovak dissidents focused more on religious liberties and environmental issues and the latter also led to massive protests in the Czech part of Czechoslovakia, but the current remembrance puts emphasis on freedom of expression, the rule of the law, non-discrimination of minorities and other basic characteristics of liberal democracies that were denied by the ruling communist parties. In addition to that, the social and economic rights of the second wave of human rights were adopted by the United Nations during the Cold War at the initiative of many Third World countries and the Soviet Union, i.e. the very same power that denied the first generation of civil rights. It is only understandable that many opponents to the communist regimes felt distrust towards or even rejected the second and third generations of human rights. Moreover, this critical discourse trickled down to the formulation of the Central European foreign policies and even to their implementation – by the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for example. It is only logical that the reduction of human rights to their civil and political dimension has petrified the reduced political understanding of the transition as a strong foreign policy feature of the former communist countries.

In consequence, this narrow view of the transition persisted in the 1990s and beyond. The diverse social groups that became the new elites of Central Europe were often unaware of their privileged initial conditions as compared to the conditions of their Eastern and Southern neighbours, not to mention those of the overseas countries. Despite their slightly rising income inequality and poverty rates, and the acceleration of the rise of income inequality and poverty that was caused by the global recession, the Visegrád Group countries still rank globally among the countries with the lowest levels of income inequality and relative poverty. The initial high level of human development brought by the state-owned system of education and health care combined with the maintenance of the social safety nets from the communist era during the radical liberalization of the Central European economies in the early 1990s resulted in a unique success story. Despite all the shortcomings that we know very well, a large majority of the citizens of the region could benefit from the combination of political freedom, eco-

conomic growth, the low poverty rate and a significant improvement of the environment, at least in the areas of water and air pollution. Of course, the advancement in the early 1990s was due to the greater democratic participation, but at the same time this political participation was enabled by the existence of the educated masses, which were only at a small risk of social exclusion. The role of the social policies during the transition cannot be emphasised enough, but this is not to deny that new forms of exclusion appeared, primarily due to the unemployment of those unable to keep up the pace with the economic transition and the rising consumerism, namely the ethnic minorities of Central Europe. The deeper discrimination of the ethnic minorities has other than economic reasons but more generally, it is difficult to find any other region than Central Europe where such a massive economic liberalization produced relatively fewer social disparities.

In contrast to that, today, most of the world's poorest populations currently live in the middle-income countries, which face a growing internal inequality and a continuing degradation of their environment. These countries can afford policies to mitigate the negative impacts of the economic growth on the poorest people. Yet a large part of the Central European development assistance still consists in technology transfers provided by private companies or in charitable community projects of non-profit organizations, but these will not solve the problems of the poorest one billion people around the world. On the contrary, the emphasis must be put on building the social and environmental policies of the countries in the global South. Many Central European governments paid a lot of attention to them on their own soil in spite of their market-oriented ideologies. However, these issues are largely absent from their political dialogue with the governments in the global South.

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In sum, the Visegrád Group must rethink its story of the transition experience. It is not only a story about the brave individuals who sacrificed their own liberty for that of their fellow citizens, as is frequently reductively stated nowadays. Nor is it an account of one-size-fits-all policy prescriptions. Such a limited concept of transition would be reductive, out of context, and ultimately not transferable to the countries that do not share similar economic, social and cultural conditions as Central Europe. In fact, Transition Experience 2.0 is a story about the indivisibility of political and civil liberties from social and economic rights and the environment. It is a story in which sustainable social development cannot be achieved without profound political changes towards accountability and in which a certain level of social equality is a necessary condition for the political participation of the people in selecting their own future. It is a story that refuses



to consider the social and economic development as a problem that can be resolved by the enlightened experts, leaders and other elites in a technocratic and authoritarian way. Transition Experience 2.0 is a story that the Central European diplomacies and the Visegrád Group can jointly promote in the European and international debate on the future common framework for global and sustainable development that will replace the Millennium Development Goals after 2015.

## Transition Experience 2.0 in practice: an empowered human rights policy...

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The new narrative cannot inspire the domestic, European and global audiences if it does not trickle down to the existing foreign policy instruments. In order to gain some credibility, the national positions towards international priorities, norms and budgets in Brussels, Geneva and New York must be supported by the concurrent implementation in the bilateral policies of the Central European countries. This is a difficult task, however, since their democratization and development policy budgets are already tight. The 'new' EU member states dramatically failed to reach the already decreased commitments on Official Development Assistance, which includes the volumes spent on both human rights and global development. Hence the only solution is for them to combine the strengths of their relatively tiny foreign policy instruments in their long-term strategy as well as in day-to-day operations.

As far as human policy and democratization policy are concerned, the Central European foreign ministries and the Visegrád Fund can support civil society groups that defend not only political but also social, economic and environmental rights. This is already

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happening in a few cases. For example, the Czech foreign ministry is currently supporting an NGO that helps the citizens in a certain Bosnian district to mobilise and use the law to defend their families

from a major air polluting plant that belongs to a transnational company. The NGO builds here on its experience in mobilizing citizens to rise against the same company in the Eastern part of the Czech Republic. That means that in this case, the rhetoric of the enlarged understanding of human rights is seconded by the domestic experience of the social and environmental movements. In regard to many countries of the world where it is impossible to raise the issues of political and civil rights openly, this step can serve as a Trojan horse for activating the sense of citizenship in the issue areas that are sensi-

tive to their more or less authoritarian governments. In any case human rights defenders should continue to be supported notwithstanding the will of their governments.

In the Czech Republic, the current centre-left government has recently supported the enlarged understanding of human rights. However, its critics are suspicious of this move. The traditional actors fear not only the possible diversion of financial funds towards new non-governmental organizations, but they are afraid that the more comprehensive approach might dilute the stress on human rights at the expense of the business interests in the practice of the foreign policy. This objection is highly relevant for Hungary, where the ruling government is questioning the values of liberal democracy. However, the critics are also suspicious of the enlarged understanding of rights as a concept because of their lack of experience with the global South at large. They are right when they say that social rights, or, more concretely, sustainable human development and poverty eradication, cannot be achieved in the long term without free access to information and equal participation of women and men in the making of local, national and global politics. However, the poor and especially women cannot be expected to take full advantage of their formal civil rights if they lack access to water and food, and their sustainable livelihoods are threatened by the destruction of the environment and indecent work. The social rights to education and health are crucial too, since political participation is barely possible when people lack the ability to read and write as well as adequate health care that would keep women, men and young people from contracting debilitating diseases.

This is evidenced by two examples. In spite of being the largest liberal democracy, India is now home to the largest group of the poorest people on the planet, and the enforcement of civic rights is highly problematic for them. On the other hand, China's unprecedented yet unevenly distributed economic growth is accompanied by the growing discontent of its population, who suffer because of the devastated environment in China and exhausting working conditions and are frustrated by their inability to stand up for their rights. The calls for specific rights depend on groups and situations, and hence a narrow understanding of such calls for rights is not sufficient. Moreover, while the first generation of human rights was enacted by the West alone, the second and third generations of rights benefited from the participation of more or less democratic Third World governments in their creation since their inception, which underlines the indivisibility of human rights. The enlarged understanding of human rights is hence more sensitive to the cultures and local needs of the world's communities and polities. It widens the thus far narrow Central European understanding of human rights that is limited by a lack of global perspectives that was caused by the relative isolation of the West-oriented elites before and during the transition.

## ...and a rights-based development policy: no merger, but different target groups

Transition Experience 2.0 can have more far reaching benefits for the Central European countries and their partner countries when it is applied to their development policies. The reason is very simple. The international development cooperation budgets, both bilateral and multilateral, are far bigger than the democratization and human rights policy budgets. To take the Czech example, the bilateral development project budget alone is ten times higher than the democratization and human rights policy budgets and the potential of increasing its impact is also much higher than the potential of increasing the impacts of the other two budgets. On account of the public diplomacy, it could be argued that the Central Europeans have already helped to promote social, economic and environmental rights by channelling their aid into social, business and environmental sectors. But the rights-based approach to development as a necessary expression of the

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enlarged understanding of human rights is not merely about labelling. One-shot deliveries of goods and services by the Central European NGOs and businesses to

the social and environmental sectors in the partner countries do not necessarily empower the citizens in the partner countries to claim their rights, including political and civic rights. To be sure, right-holders must be met by those who have obligations towards them, which are often carried out in the form of a service provided by the state, a local government or a private company. However, the evaluation reports also show that the ownership of the Czech development projects by the partners is weak, which is a problem that the other Central European countries probably share as well. In addition to that, the evaluations also reveal the low sustainability of the projects. This is due to the fact that the projects are often based on the identification of needs and solutions by the donor rather than on unfulfilled rights in the partner countries and a participative approach towards them among the citizens, including the most voiceless and vulnerable ones, and their political representatives.

The rights-based approach not only leads to more sustainable activities in the public or private sector. It also gives more power to the citizens instead of considering them as passive aid recipients and hence it creates more egalitarian relationships between the donor and the partner. It would also increase the effectiveness of the Central European development cooperation by discarding bad project proposals that do not pass the test of whether they empower people to claim their rights as well as empowering the authorities to provide them with the related obligations where possible. With this practice, the unsustainable charity type projects of NGOs that see aid recipients as victims



and export-oriented projects of private companies that consider them as customers would not become eligible for public funding anymore. The application of the rights-based approach requires a sustained dialogue with the partner organizations, and hence the presence of the Central European development agencies or at least development diplomats in the partner countries is also an institutional condition for its implementation.

The Central European diplomacies have already emphasised the role of human rights in development in the Council of the European Union and in relation to the post-2015 global development framework. However, this accent will not be credible if they do not learn from other multilateral and bilateral donors as well as international non-governmental organizations. Many of them have developed detailed frameworks for implementing the right-based approach to development cooperation in the programme and project cycle management. As a first

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step, however, a simple checklist of human rights and the related obligations in the identification forms would help to identify the projects with the highest potential for making a lasting change in the lives of the partner countries. In any case, the rights-based approach is incompatible neither with the requirements of the EU and the OECD in the field of development cooperation nor with development effectiveness commitments.

The enlarged list of human rights as well as the rights-based approach to development open an important problem. After all, is there any difference between the upgraded human rights and development policies? It is clear that there is a thematic overlap between both foreign policy instruments but this is no reason for a merger between them. The main difference consists in the target groups of the two policies. The human rights and democratization projects should continue to aim at the civil society and social and environmental movements in countries where it is impossible to achieve respect for the rights of the people by cooperating with the government, as the governments are often the main abusers. This does not mean that the Central European governments should not raise human rights issues in the political dialogue with the authoritarian governments, quite the contrary. Complementarity is an imperative in the development cooperation priority countries where governments abuse human rights. At the same time the development cooperation should remain faithful to the principles of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and give a clear preference to the cooperation with the local and central governments and build their capacities so that they would honour the

rights, including political and civic rights, of their citizens instead of bypassing them. The choice is not exclusive, and in many countries human rights and development poli-

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cies can and should coexist, which is already the case in many East and South-East European countries. The day-to-day implementation of Transition Experience 2.0 is more about continuity than

change, but the Central European foreign ministries need to coordinate strategies for the human rights and development areas in order to tackle the overlaps and define the best mix for each priority country.

## Conclusion: The implications of Transition Experience 2.0 for public diplomacy, Central European cooperation and policy coherence

During the global recession, many Central European governments have decided to decrease or at least freeze the funding for raising the already low public awareness of their development cooperation programmes. This is also due to the fact that development policy is a part of their foreign policies and hence a part of their public diplomacy, which is another weak point of the foreign ministries in the region. The joint approach to human rights and development should not stop at the conceptual implementation levels but it should also reach the public awareness activities in those two fields as well as the related field of humanitarian assistance. For example, the Czech Republic can use its brand and logo *Česká republika pomáhá [The Czech Republic helps]* not only for its development cooperation but also for its transition projects and humanitarian assistance. Whether these public diplomacy campaigns are implemented directly by the foreign ministries or outsourced to non-governmental organizations and public relation agencies, the individual projects and their implementers should not be presented at the expense of the more general idea behind the Central European foreign policies that is closely related to people's own experiences.

Further synergies between human rights and development can be created across the Central European borders. This does not concern only the Visegrád Group, which has the big advantage of having the Visegrád Fund as a financial tool that can support initiatives such as Transition Experience 2.0. As the example of the European Transition Compendium shows, so far the initiatives of the 'new' EU member states, including the Baltic States, have suffered by the fact that they were neither shared nor understood by the 'old'

member states. Transition Experience 2.0 is based on a reinterpretation of the post-communist experience, yet its message is universal and hence it should be supported by other Central European countries. The cooperation between the Central European countries must carefully balance the uniqueness of the experience with universality in every aspect of the narrative as well as self-reflection with a results-oriented approach. Hand in hand with this, the concept of transition must be handled with care and always in relation to the specific post-1989 experience. It should serve as a background, but not as a goal in itself. The word transition by itself might even be avoided in the global South because it implies a movement from point A to point B rather than an open-ended process that meets the specific priorities of an empowered polity in a different social, cultural and economic context. In the same vein, the word democracy should not necessarily imply the same political organization as the one in Central Europe.

Finally, unlike most of their Western and Northern neighbours, the Central European countries consider development policy as an integral part of foreign policy. This is often considered as an obstacle for prioritizing poverty reduction as the main goal of development cooperation. However, the presence of the human rights and development departments within the same foreign ministries is also an opportunity for a greater internal coherence. The external coherence remains a far bigger challenge. Nevertheless, the acknowledgment of the linkages between global politics, economy, society and environment is the first step for the Central European foreign ministries to take in the process of taking the crucial agenda of policy coherence for development seriously. The narrative of Transition Experience 2.0 can be used as a starting point for the dialogue with other ministries whose positions on climate, trade, agriculture and financial policies, to take a few examples, may deepen the poverty and harm the political, economic, social and environmental rights of the citizens living in the global South. After 25 years, the remaining empathy of the Central Europeans towards the endeavours of their neighbours for better lives, especially those in the former Soviet bloc, merits both reflection and concrete actions.

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## Recommendations for the Central European foreign ministries

1. After twenty-five years of independent foreign policy making, the Central European countries are still looking for a way to define and implement their specific contribution in the field of global development and human rights. It is time for them to reflect

upon their past experience of their transition from an authoritarian to a democratic regime and from a centrally planned to a free market economy and stress the link between politics, economics, society and the environment in their unique experience.

2. The upgraded narrative Transition Experience 2.0 promotes the view that sustainable social development cannot be achieved without a profound increase in political accountability, and at the same time a certain level of social equality is a necessary condition for the political participation of the people in selecting their own future. The Central European diplomacies and the Visegrád Group should promote this approach in the largely depoliticised European and international debate on the future common framework for global and sustainable development that will replace the Millennium Development Goals after 2015.
3. In order to gain credibility, the national positions towards international priorities, norms and budgets in Brussels, Geneva and New York must be supported by the concurrent implementation in the bilateral policies of the Central European countries. The Central European foreign ministries must accordingly enlarge the scope of human rights they promote in their democratization policies as well as introduce a rights-based approach in their development cooperation.
4. The Central European foreign ministries and the Visegrád Fund should financially support civil society groups and social movements that not only defend the first generation of human rights (civic and political rights) but also the second and third generations of human rights (social, economic, environmental and other human rights). The enlarged understanding of human rights is more sensitive to cultures and the local needs of the communities and polities. It also increases the impact by activating the general sense of citizenship in the issue areas that are not necessarily controlled by the authoritarian governments.
5. As a complementary step the Central European governments should use the leverage of the substantially higher development cooperation budgets by applying the rights-based approach to development cooperation. Instead of considering the partners in development as passive aid recipients, the rights-based approach would increase the effectiveness of the Central European development cooperation programmes by discarding bad project proposals that do not pass the test of whether they empower the citizens to claim their rights as well as empowering the authorities to provide them with the related obligations.
6. In spite of the thematic overlaps Transition Experience 2.0 does not erase the division of labour between the human rights and development policies. The human rights and democratization projects should continue in aiming at the civil society and social and environmental movements in countries where it is impossible to achieve the desired respect for rights by a cooperation with the rights-abusing governments and through a sustained political dialogue. Human rights defenders should continue to

be supported notwithstanding the will of their governments. At the same time the development cooperation should remain faithful to the principles of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and give a clear preference to cooperation with the local and central governments and build their capacities to honour the rights of their citizens instead of bypassing them.

7. The Central European foreign ministries should use their limited budgets for increasing the public awareness of human rights, development cooperation and humanitarian assistance by using a unique brand. The individual projects and their implementers should not be presented at the expense of the more general idea of foreign policy that builds on the domestic Transition Experience 2.0. Yet the concept of transition as independent from the specific experience associated with it might be avoided abroad since it does not imply an open-ended process that would be specific to the different cultural context of the global South.
8. Given their limited budgets and global impact, the Central European governments should join their forces and use the channels and tools of mutual cooperation with a special focus on the Visegrád Fund to promote their unique approach to human rights and development. However, the Visegrád Group should also involve other Central European countries to balance the particular post-communist experience and the capital of empathy that it entailed with its universal message.
9. Harnessing Transition Experience 2.0 as a way of closing the gap between the human rights and development policies globally is facilitated by the fact that the Central European countries consider both development and human rights policies as integral parts of their foreign policies, which increases the chances for an internally coherent policy. However, the Central European foreign ministries should use the Transition Experience 2.0 narrative that relinks global politics, economics, society and the environment as a starting point for a serious discussion and actions in the field of policy coherence for development.

Note: This policy paper is based on an IIR Policy Paper published in Czech in June 2014. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the international conference *Development and Democracy. Development Ecosystems in V4: the New Role for Civil Society Organisations and Business beyond Millennium Development Goals* in Bratislava on 15 October 2014 and it was also published in its proceedings. The author is grateful for the comments by the participants of the round table where it was presented as well as those of Katarína Šrámková.

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