



# FROM RECIPIENTS TO DONORS: CENTRAL EUROPE AND EU DEVELOPMENT AID

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*Amid global political tensions, Central European countries, once aid recipients, have emerged as donors under EU and OECD supervision. Drawing on critical approaches to Europeanisation and donor identity, this article applies a four-dimensional framework of donor identity (discursive, institutional, behavioural, and external) to analyse how the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland construct their roles within EU development policy. While aligning formally with EU and DAC norms, these states often resist the traditional donor model by drawing on their post-socialist experience, lack of colonial legacy, and emphasis on regional proximity and solidarity. Their engagement subtly challenges dominant development narratives, revealing internal tensions and overlooked variation among EU donors. By conceptualising donor identity as a multidimensional and underexplored aspect of development studies, this article contributes to research on the CEE region, Europeanisation, and the evolving role of smaller EU states in global development governance.*

**Key words:** donor identity; EU development cooperation; post-socialist donors; EU aid; CEE Development Donors.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

While many rules and guidelines exist for providing aid, all the EU Member States' bilateral development cooperation policies have not evolved equally. Mainly shaped by Western European countries, 'traditional donors' and the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) founding members, little room has been left for others to influence the development assistance landscape. Although DAC membership offers donors a voice in the field, it requires them to follow

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already set and widely recognised rules on 'good donorship'. In international development research, traditional donors are often contrasted with other large bilateral donors who are not DAC members and choose a different donorship path, particularly China, emerging donors, Arab countries or South Africa (Kondoh 2015; Mawdsley 2012). However, minimal research exists on the position and donorship of Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, transitioning from recipient status within a regional union like the EU and under an established set of rules of the OECD DAC.

Article operates with the term 'CEE countries', as it is commonly used in the academic literature, and presents an underexplored region. However, this article focuses on the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia, and argues that they frame their development role through discourses of transition experience, regional solidarity, and non-colonial legitimacy, despite rules and commitments arising from their EU and DAC membership. As these identity narratives subtly challenge the technocratic, depoliticised norms dominant in the EU and OECD DAC development frameworks (Horký-Hlucháň 2015), does it mean these three countries construct a distinct *donor identity* within the EU development cooperation field?

Article was primarily built on constructivist approaches to nation-state identity and its formation (Alexandrov 2003; Tulmets 2014; Wendt 1999), as 'donors' are states that provide development assistance. Viewing *donor identity* as a socially constructed and contextually performed role, this article used a discourse analysis to examine how the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia construct and legitimise their identities. Based on an analysis of available concepts related or relevant to *donor identity*, this article introduces a resulting framework of four distinct dimensions of *donor identity* formation, in which countries become donors through narratives, self-positioning, interactions with external actors, and institutional setups or aid volumes. Considering the historical formation of these countries is essential for this analysis, in terms of the construction of nation-states, their foreign policies (mainly European and OECD integration), and their emergence as development donors. While important work on differences between various donor paths exists (Kondoh 2015; Mawdsley 2012; Alesina and Dollar 2020; Lancaster 2006), none consider the specifics of CEE countries, and there is no consistent donor typology or framework. Existing research tends to overwhelmingly focus on donors' aid behaviour, aid volumes and flow, but neglects donors' own and/or perceived identity. Therefore, this article introduces a four-dimensional, conceptual framework that considers different aspects of development aid provision to better understand the constructed and recognised *donor identity* in multilateral contexts.

The first section of this article aims to frame the concept of *donor identity* based on the constructivist theories on the formation of nation-states. It provides an overview of existing research on *donor identities* that inspired this article's four-dimensional framework, which is introduced in the following section. The third section provides a historical and contextual insight into the formation of the CEE countries' bilateral development cooperation policies. The framework is applied in the following section, which dives into the four dimensions' key indicators and presents the analysis results, which are debated in the final section.

## 2 FRAMING A DONOR IDENTITY

### 2.1 Existing *Donor Identity* Literature

The existing research on the identity of donors mainly concentrates on topics such as aid models, differences between DAC members and emerging donors, Southern development actors, and donor behaviour. Approaches to such research differ widely, from normative or altruistic to governmental. This section provides a summarising overview that helped form the four-dimensional approach. Tulmets (2014) highlights how the historical formation of CEE nation-states shapes their foreign policy identities. Drawing on constructivist perspectives, she argues that responses to European integration vary depending on each country's historical sense of 'self'. Drawing on Marcussen et al. (1999), she adapted a set of factors to explain the CEE context: 1. underdeveloped consolidation of values due to limited or delayed nation-state formation – the Czech Republic and Slovakia gained independence after World War I, and they identify more with a multinational tradition than a nation-state, with Poland being an exception; 2. political elites make decisions based on perceived interests, especially during critical junctures like the post-Cold War revolutions; and 3. national identity, shaped by political consensus and institutionalized through socialization, is resistant to change. The last factor is also presented by Lancaster (2006), who argued that it is difficult to change organisational arrangements institutionalising aid provision, once they are in place.

Regarding application to development donors, the existing literature is minimal and inconsistent. Lancaster (2006) argued against using a theory on aid provision, stating that existing theories overlook the significance of domestic politics. Focusing on traditional donors, her book examines the shifting purposes behind aid provision. While insightful on a general aid provision basis, her book does not reflect on CEE donors.

Alesina and Dollar (2000) argued that aid is primarily driven by political and strategic interests, colonial ties, and recipients' democratic progress, rather than purely altruistic or poverty-based motivations. They identified different donor types: those driven by need (e.g., Nordic countries), colonial history (e.g., France, Portugal), or geopolitics (e.g., the U.S.). They also introduced UN voting patterns to capture donor–recipient political alignment. While they documented why aid has often failed to reduce poverty, they excluded former communist countries, noting their limited aid history prior to the end of the Cold War. Parts of this research inspired the four-dimensional model, especially considering colonial history and political alliances, and focus points, such as democratisation policies, focus on specific political or economic regimes, etc.

Mawdsley (2012) applied gift theory to South-South cooperation, identifying four key traits: shared developing-country identity, development experience, rejection of traditional hierarchies, and mutual benefit. She contrasts its emphasis on reciprocity with Western aid, often seen as unreciprocated charity shaped by OECD DAC norms. South-South cooperation offers dignity and status through reciprocal exchange, something traditional donors lack due to their postcolonial framing and universalist assumptions. Although CEE countries cannot be considered Southern development donors, they share a level of reasoning for aid provision, mainly regarding transition and experience sharing, as well as mutual and reciprocity opportunities.

Kondoh (2015) defined emerging donors as non-DAC members and identified four identity types to differentiate aid models. A 'superpower identity' refers to alternative norm-makers with global aspirations but limited influence in the already established field, who contest the status quo (e.g. China or India). An 'African middle-power identity', mainly South Africa, stresses South-South cooperation and its distinction from traditional donors. An 'Islamic identity' and an 'Asian middle-power identity' are usually aligned with DAC norms. Although CEE countries cannot be categorised under any of these identities, a degree of similarity can be found in the 'superpower identity'.

Perhaps the most relevant research is by Szent-Iványi and Lightfoot (2015), who applied a governmental politics approach to foreign aid policymaking, which they adapted to the CEE countries and included domestic and international non-governmental actors as political influencers. Their model operates with different stakeholders and their interactions – international actors and national governments, domestic actors and national governments, and interactions between government agencies. They argue that the 'social learning', based on constructivist institutionalism, happens through various national as well as international actors and that *'nation states will adopt international norms and laws not because the costs of adoption outweigh the benefits, but because these rules become internalised and a conviction gradually develops that they represent the only proper way to act'*. They further argue that three specific variables determine the power and influence of governmental actors – institutions, agencies' capacities, and their ability to build coalitions and mobilise allies. While their research explains CEE countries' reasons and incentives for their decision-making in bilateral development assistance, this article strives to provide a picture of their 'donor identity', going beyond behavioural and policy analysis. Smolaga and Zajaczkowski (2024) classified CEE countries as emerging donors and argued they follow a 'donor interest' model of aid allocation, prioritising their own geopolitical and economic goals. They argued that while changes linked to DAC membership suggest a possible shift toward a 'hybrid model', their aid behaviour still contrasts with traditional donors. Their ODA data analysis supports the behavioural dimension of this article.

## 2.2 Four-dimensional Donor Identity Framework

Article was inspired by Tulmets' (2014) methodology on CEE countries' national identity in foreign affairs, building on constructivist theories of state identity that consider actors' behaviour shaped by norms, beliefs and values constituting their identity, which is multilayered and can evolve (Wendt 1999). Tulmets concentrated on the overall role of CEE countries in their foreign affairs policies, particularly in relation to how these nations shape their identities. This article has tailored that approach to development cooperation. An inductive method was used to gather empirical data on the concepts of *state* and *donor identity*, which then informed the creation of a four-dimensional framework based on the findings.

The following framework is inspired by the significant research directions in nation-state identity and studies in donor behaviour and aid models. The literature review in the previous section overwhelmingly focuses on the relations between countries' actions via their foreign policies and donor behaviour. Considering the historical background of forming CEE countries' foreign affairs policies, this article also touches on Europeanisation to explain the pressure for convergence, institutional mimicry, and the adoption of certain norms and values.

However, it is also an example of negative Europeanisation in some instances, mainly due to the EU’s inability to ensure that Member States adhere to rules and commitments.

The framework resulting from this research and analysis focuses on four dimensions of *donor identity*: discursive, institutional, behavioural, and external/perceived (Table 1). These dimensions capture the complexity of policy formation and implementation, shaped by historical context, political ties, and internal or external pressures. They consider donors’ institutional and financial capacities, democratic transitions, and relationships with other actors. Rather than focusing solely on aid volumes, they highlight context, purpose, and narrative.

TABLE 1: FOUR-DIMENSIONAL FRAMEWORK OF DONOR IDENTITY

	Description	Key indicators & Analysis
<b>DISCURSIVE</b>	How donors frame their identity, legitimacy, and values through narratives, e.g. how they speak about their donor role.	Framing of development aid, references to self-perception and priority values, e.g. through national strategies, programming, etc.
<b>INSTITUTIONAL</b>	Aid systems’ structure, capacity and legislative and institutional setup, e.g. organisational structures and policy tools.	Agency formation and functioning, coordination with the EU, ODA budget, staff size and organisational charts, policy coherence across institutions, etc.
<b>BEHAVIOURAL</b>	What donors do, where and how.	Geographical or sectoral focus, aid volumes and flows, modalities, e.g. aid allocation data, country-specific ODA profiles, EU implementation partnerships, etc.
<b>EXTERNAL</b>	How other actors perceive countries as donors, e.g. EU institutions, recipient countries, NGOs, etc.	Inclusion in EU strategic dialogues, feedback from recipient countries, visibility in international forums, etc., e.g. through third-party evaluations of aid and aid effectiveness and academic or NGO commentary.

While this typology offers a comprehensive tool for future comparative analysis, this article focuses on the discourse that constructs and reflects *donor identity*. As identity is constructed in language and discourse reflects why and how countries perform their donor roles, this article uses a discourse analysis to assess development cooperation strategies, programming, setup, priority areas, etc. Discourse is therefore considered a social practice connecting discursive events with situations, institutions, and social structures; it is shaped by them but also influences them. Thus, this article also considers that discourse cannot be constructed without context (Fairclough and Wodak 1997).

### 3 CEE DEVELOPMENT DONORS

#### 3.1 Development of the CEE countries’ donor roles

During the Cold War era, CEE countries under communist rule did provide some development assistance. However, it is unclear how such political decisions were made or how comparable those policies were to today’s standards. Aid was directed towards other countries with communist regimes, and the narrative of providing aid to the ‘Third World’ countries was rejected as a responsibility of former colonial powers in the West. Aid was primarily provided to secure political, military, or trade influence, but was always aligned with the foreign policies of the Soviet Union. Such aid consisted mainly of technical and scientific cooperation based on tied aid and higher education scholarships. After gaining independence in the 1990s, CEE countries primarily focused on their own economic transformation and international standing, with previous development policies disappearing in the process (Szent-Iványi and Lightfoot 2015; Szent-Iványi and Lightfoot 2024).

Polish foreign policy has since been clearly focused on Eastern Europe rather than Western Balkans, arguably drawn from interwar ideas based on 'Polishness', a sense of responsibility derived from a common destiny of population from the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania, Ukraine and Belarus. The Czech Republic has, on the other hand, been emphasising its role as a central European country, prioritising the Western Balkans in its foreign policy. Historical ties, such as shared Austro-Hungarian heritage and interwar relations with Yugoslavia, reinforced this focus. Eastern Europe became a formal priority only with the 2009 EU presidency, previously carrying negative public perceptions linked to immigration and the Ukrainian minority (Tulmets 2014).

With aspirations to become OECD and EU members, CEE countries relaunched their bilateral development policies in the early 2000s to align with the EU *acquis*. However, full compliance was not enforced, as all faced institutional, legal, and financial limitations that hindered effective implementation (Szent-Iványi and Lightfoot 2015). In the 2000s, CEE countries received substantial capacity-building assistance from established donors, from reporting ODA figures to OECD DAC, project cycle management and efficient institutions, to managing tenders and contracts, monitoring and evaluation, etc. The most extensive programs were provided by the Canadian International Development Agency and UNDP (Szent-Iványi and Tétényi 2013). By the time of the CEE countries' accession to the EU in 2004, they were formally classified as high-income countries that must be ready to provide development assistance. However, their GDP was below 40% of the EU average, and some recipient countries of the EU Development Policy had higher incomes. CEE countries were aware of this; societal and governmental support for development policy at the time was relatively low, and their perception was to give support at home first. It is, therefore, almost certain that the key driver in the creation of development policies in CEE countries was the EU (Granel 2005; Szent-Iványi and Lightfoot 2015; Lancaster 2006).

### 3.2 Strategies and priorities of bilateral development assistance

Regarding the EU's goal of development assistance, only the Czech Republic and Slovakia emphasised their international commitments to reducing poverty as core elements of their development policies, focusing on promoting human rights, democracy, and sustainable development. Polish strategy, however, focused on democracy promotion and long-term social and economic development, thus referencing poverty reduction as an indirect goal (Szent-Iványi and Lightfoot 2015).

In terms of the strategic direction of the CEE countries, despite the EU *acquis* and OECD DAC recommendations, none have achieved satisfactory results. The Czech Republic was considered highly donor-driven in the 2000s, with recipients having almost no influence on development assistance planning and programming, questioning the level of recipients' ownership of aid results (OECD 2007). Poland did not make its country strategies public, but Slovakia began providing strategy articles in 2009; however, this effort has not been consistent. Although the Czech Republic provides some level of project and financing information online, the 2013 Aid Transparency Index assessed all three countries as poor or very poor in terms of transparency (Publish What You Fund 2013).

Most recently, all three countries have broadly aligned their strategies and priorities with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs. The Slovak strategy identifies programme and project countries and regions with

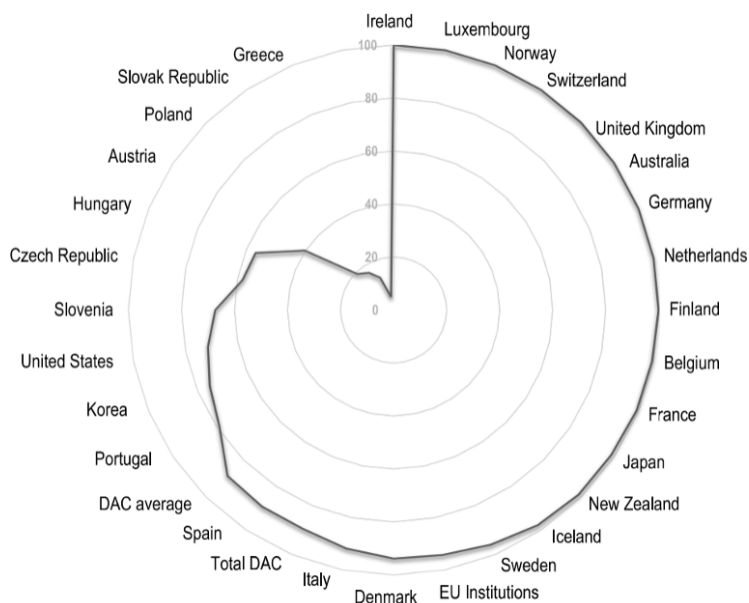
exceptional humanitarian needs, while focusing on seven priority sectors like education, healthcare, good governance, agriculture, water, energy, and market environment, alongside cross-cutting issues such as environmental protection, gender equality, human rights, and good governance. Poland operates under its 2021–2030 ‘Solidarity for Development’ multiannual programme, which sets a limit of ten priority partner countries, predominantly in Eastern Europe, and traditionally focuses on democratic transition, good governance, civil society, and human rights, though it has recently broadened its thematic scope to include areas like health, sustainable cities, and climate action. The Czech Republic has a long-term strategy (2018–2030) that concentrates on six priority countries and additional territories for post-conflict stabilisation, with thematic priorities encompassing stable and democratic institutions, sustainable natural resource management, agriculture and rural development, inclusive social development, and economic growth, strongly leveraging its own transition experience to promote human rights and democracy. All three countries also emphasise multilateral cooperation, particularly with the EU, and view policy coherence for development as a critical element (OECD 2018; OECD 2023b; OECD 2023c).

Both the Czech Republic and Slovakia reference their transition experience in official strategies. While Poland used to position itself as a promoter of democracy in Eastern Europe, its current development policy strategy does not mention transition experience or support for democracy, instead referencing only good governance. The Czech strategy mentions adopted EU norms and practices, in contrast with the Polish one, which vaguely includes key EU strategies. The Czech Republic is the only country of the three that regularly conducts and publishes project evaluations (Szent-Iványi and Lightfoot 2024).

Another aspect of development aid provision that CEE countries have been struggling with is tied aid. OECD DAC members are required to meet the target of untied official development assistance, meaning the removal of any conditions that require recipients to procure goods or services from the aid provider. The objective is to provide value for money and contribute to the goal of recipient country ownership. While the OECD (2009) claims that untied bilateral aid increased to 82% in the 2000s, it remains most noticeable in the CEE countries. Less than half of the provided aid in 2019–2020 was reported as untied by the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia, while the latter two neared 0% (Figure 1). Arguing for strengthening competitiveness for their domestic NGOs in the international arena, aid was widely provided through national actors, despite increasing pressure from the OECD. While Poland references creating export opportunities for Polish companies as part of its development strategy, the Czech Republic and Slovakia only mention their private sector to increase resources for development activities (OECD 2010; Szent-Iványi and Lightfoot 2015; Szent-Iványi and Lightfoot 2024).

FIGURE 1: SHARE OF ODA AS UNTIED BY DAC MEMBERS, 2019–2020 AVERAGE

Share of official development assistance covered by the Recommendation reported as untied by DAC members, 2019-20 average



Notes: Calculations exclude administrative costs, in-development co-operation provider refugee costs and other sectors not covered by the DAC Recommendation on Untying Official Development Assistance. Data on the tying status are reportable on a commitment basis.

Source: OECD (2022).

Generally, while all three countries have clearly defined their official development cooperation in line with the EU, OECD DAC and UN guidelines and commitments, their prioritised geographical focus reflects their historical ties. It expresses perceived solidarity with the countries that share a common past with them and possibly the same or similar values (Tulmets 2014).

### 3.3 Aid volume and flows

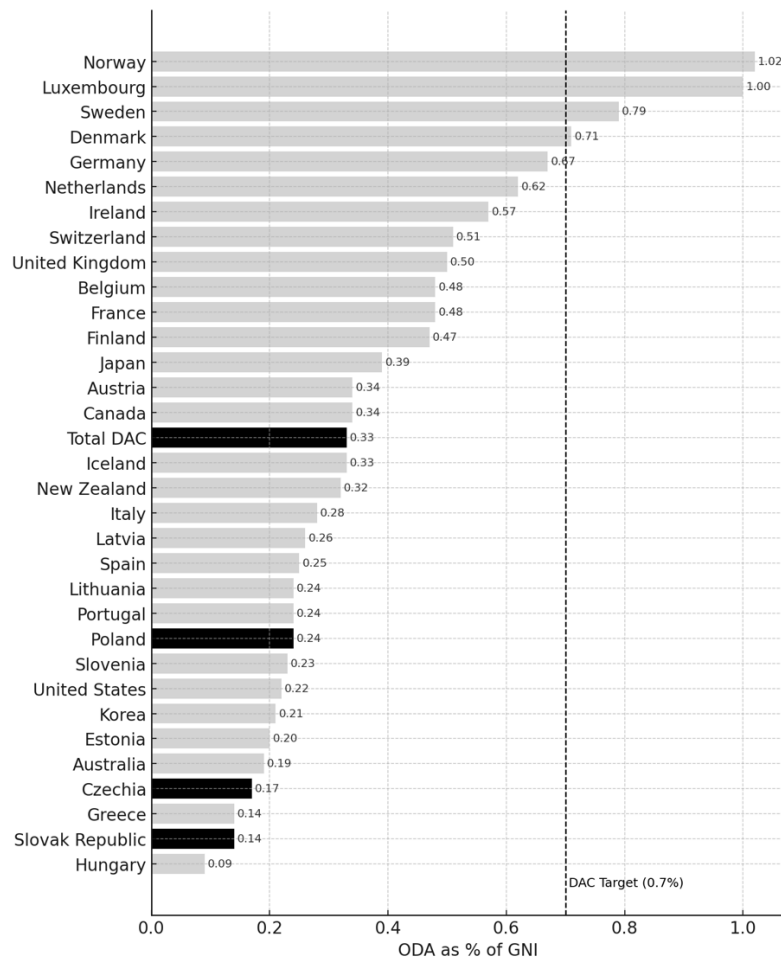
The EU encouraged all new Member States to ‘strive to increase’ their ODA to 0.33% of GNI by 2015, with an interim goal of 0.17% by 2010 (The European Consensus on Development 2006). Attributed to several factors, including the end of co-financing from international donors, EU accession, a lack of knowledge on how to report ODA correctly, and, finally, the 2008 economic crisis, CEE countries saw a significant gap in ODA performance and their commitments (CONCORD 2011). Apart from the Czech Republic, which established a multi-annual indicative timetable for development assistance in 2010, no CEE countries had any explicit commitment or a legally binding financial strategy to achieve the ODA/GNI goal set by the EU (European Commission 2011). Despite significant progress, all three countries do not comply with most of the EU’s requirements for bilateral development assistance. There are, however, differences among them. The Czech Republic provides increasing amounts of aid to the poorest countries, has a well-established legal and strategic framework, has made clear efforts to concentrate its aid allocation, and is the most transparent, doing the most in terms of donor coordination (Szent-Iványi and Lightfoot 2015).

Regarding pre-existing external relations that typically influence development assistance strategies, all three had limited engagement with Africa and the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), partly due to the absence of a colonial history. Since the start of their DAC membership, CEE countries have primarily focused on countries with good macroeconomic policies, a degree of quality institutions and

aid-supported economic growth, as well as geographical proximity and geopolitical importance, such as Moldova, Ukraine, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Belarus, and Georgia. Therefore, this suggests a ‘donor interest’ model, with donors prioritising their own interests over the recipient country’s needs (Smolaga and Zajackowski 2024).

In the 2000s, there were three major groups of recipients for CEE countries: 1. Iraq and Afghanistan, due to international obligations, 2. the Balkans, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, due to democratisation goals in the region as well as potential EU accession, 3. former Communist allies from the developing world due to some level of path dependence from their Communist legacy – except Slovakia, for the Czech Republic it was Ethiopia, Cambodia, Palestine, Vietnam, Yemen and Mongolia; for Poland it was Vietnam and Angola. All three countries clearly focused primarily on their Eastern neighbourhood and claimed their support for Sub-Saharan Africa through multilateral actors, mainly the EU’s European Development Fund (Szent-Iványi 2012; OECD 2025). OECD DAC sets the standards for aid delivery and oversees development aid flows globally, providing important data. The latest data (Figure 2) show that the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia remain in the lower third of DAC contributors, underscoring their limited fiscal engagement despite nearly two decades of EU membership. Their levels remain well below the DAC average of 0.33% and far from the collective EU commitment of 0.7%.

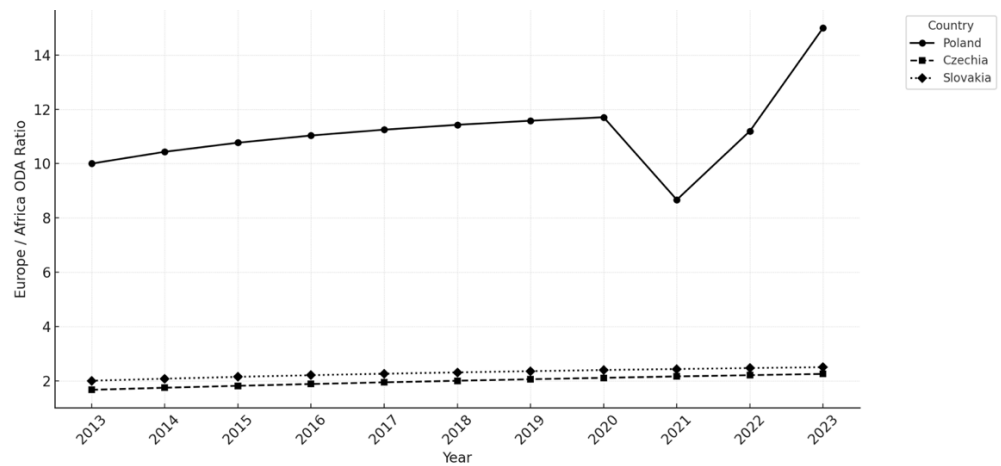
FIGURE 2: OFFICIAL DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE BY COUNTRY



Source: OECD (2022).

The Europe-to-Africa ODA ratio (Figure 3) illustrates how strongly each CEE donor prioritises its regional neighbourhood over more global commitments, contrary to OECD DAC recommendations. Poland stands out with a dramatically increasing ratio, exceeding 15:1 by 2023, indicating an overwhelming concentration of its aid in Europe. In contrast, the Czech Republic maintains the most balanced approach of the three, with a ratio of around 2:1; however, it is slowly but visibly shifting in favour of regional partners. Slovakia exhibits a similarly slow and gradual increase in regional focus, with a ratio peaking just below 3:1 by 2023. These differences highlight not only variations in strategic orientation and donor narratives but also the influence of scale: smaller donors, such as the Czech Republic and Slovakia, tend to maintain broader geographic engagement, while Poland’s larger and more politically driven aid portfolio increasingly reflects its geopolitical priorities.

FIGURE 3: RATIO OF ODA TO EUROPE VS. AFRICA (2013–2023)



Source: Author’s calculation based on data from OECD (2025) and OECD (2023a).

For example, the Czech Republic’s ODA flows increased from 0.11% to 0.15% of GNI between 2003 and 2017, and no development cooperation strategy included a plan to increase them to meet the commitment targets. The Czech Republic allocated only about 8% of its total ODA to the LDCs between 2000 and 2018, despite its development strategies designating them as priority countries. It is, however, the highest amount among the three countries. While Slovakia increasingly targets European countries over the LDCs, the Czech Republic shows an increasing commitment to the EU’s overall goal of poverty eradication (Kovářová 2021; Szent-Iványi and Lightfoot 2024).

### 3.4 Relations with external actors

Besides training and informal learning offers, DAC’s tool to motivate its members to reform their development policies is the ‘special peer reviews’. These are sets of specific recommendations which, however, the CEE countries tend to ignore. The only documented impact they might have had is the Czech Republic’s institutional structure reform, centralising ODA under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in 2009, which was aligned with the preceding peer review. DAC peer reviews largely align with the EU’s non-binding development *acquis*, but the EU has struggled to pressure Member States into compliance, as CEE countries have learned to overlook the ‘soft law’. Therefore, Europeanisation in development policy can be seen as negative in terms of discouraging the CEE countries from complying with the EU’s vision of ‘good donorship’ (Szent-Iványi and Kugiel 2020; Horký 2012; Lightfoot and Szent-Iványi 2014). This can be

partially explained by the perceived limited power of CEE countries to influence EU Development Policy, despite their lack of a formulated vision for its development (Szent-Iványi and Kugiel 2020), or by historical traumas visible in political discourse that are connected to distrust in international actors (Just and Morgado 2023). Considering themselves unable to compete with ‘traditional donors’ for EU development contracts and grants, CEE countries attempted to push for initiatives in which they believed they had a competitive advantage, such as their experience in democratic transition and focus on the EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood. However, CEE countries were not very successful in lobbying for these, although some mentions can be found in key EU policy documents, such as the 2006 European Consensus on Development, or in Poland’s support for establishing the European Endowment for Democracy and the Eastern Partnership in 2009. While political interest in development increased in Poland (as it threatened to block EU negotiations on development policy to gain an advantage in other policy areas), the Czech Republic’s and Slovakia’s low political interest in development policy allowed them to earn a higher degree of independence in decision-making, leading to better alignment and commitment results (Szent-Iványi 2014; Szent-Iványi and Kugiel 2020; Tulmets 2014; Szent-Iványi and Lightfoot 2024).

As OECD DAC peer reviews show, the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia face several critical shortcomings in their development co-operation efforts. A prevalent issue is the fragmentation of their bilateral ODA, often dispersed across numerous small, short-term projects and annual calls for proposals. This limits strategic planning, long-term impact, and alignment with partner country priorities. Furthermore, all three countries face challenges in consistently meeting their ODA/GNI targets and progressing towards untying their aid, often having a significant portion of their ODA tied to domestic entities or comprising in-donor costs. They also need to strengthen their results-based management and evaluation systems, moving beyond project monitoring to effectively measure and learn from development outcomes, and ensure policy coherence for development is systematically integrated across government policies. Finally, their partnerships with civil society and the private sector are often hindered by unpredictable funding mechanisms and a primary focus on domestic actors, rather than leveraging local expertise and resources for broader development impact (OECD 2018; OECD 2023b; OECD 2023c).

While it was long believed that the main obstacle for CEE countries was limited financial resources allocated to ODA, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 showed that CEE countries can mobilise substantial resources and capacities to increase their development budgets and use them effectively (Smolaga and Zajackowski 2024; OECD 2023b; OECD 2023c). This aligns with Lancaster’s (2006) premise that the dynamics between domestic political realities and goals, and international events, such as geopolitical shifts, shape how donors provide aid.

### 3.5 Institutional setup

All three countries mimicked the Western development aid models and institutional setup, despite lacking their capacities and resources. Moreover, all three countries created some institutional support for transition experience; the Czech Republic and Slovakia have dedicated programs under their MFAs, and Poland established a separate fund for democracy promotion abroad. The Czech Republic was the only donor that provided sectoral allocation data. (Szent-Iványi and Lightfoot 2015). Besides the Development Cooperation Department in the

Czech MFA, a separate Department for Transition Policy and Human Rights was also created. In 2007, the Czech Republic was the first among the three to establish an institutional body for the management of development cooperation, besides the MFA, in the form of the Czech Development Agency. However, in all three countries, several other ministries created assistance policies, primarily focused on technical cooperation based on sharing transition experience or adopting the EU *acquis* (Tulmets 2014).

CEE countries suffer from a lack of institutional coordination; despite official declarations on ODA allocation seeming to reflect MFA strategies, other ministries and institutions provide development assistance outside of these frameworks. Therefore, there are suggestions on establishing an institutionalised consultation mechanism that could be used for closer coordination (Smolaga and Zajackowski 2024). This fragmentation is compounded by institutional and human resources constraints, including limited staff numbers, high turnover, and a lack of dedicated expertise in development cooperation within their ministries and agencies, often leading to insufficient policy guidance, weak inter-ministerial coordination, and a lack of delegated authority, particularly to embassy staff (OECD 2018; OECD 2023b; OECD 2023c).

#### 4 UNIQUE PATH OR ADAPTING TO A SCRIPT WRITTEN ELSEWHERE?

Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland share certain aspects that differentiate them from other European, particularly 'traditional' donors. They all became OECD members by the end of the millennium and DAC members in 2013. This membership requires them to adhere to common, specific obligations related to providing development assistance. Furthermore, the EU adopted even stricter obligations on aid provision, committing its Member States to increase ODA and generally comply with the principles and recommendations of the DAC. Regarding pre-existing external relations that generally tend to shape development assistance strategies, all three had minimal relations with Africa and the LDCs, including the absence of colonial history. Therefore, most of their aid is directed to European and/or politically significant countries. As relatively new donors, they are also characterised by underdeveloped institutional frameworks, lack of human resources and poor institutional memory, further hindering their ability to provide untied development assistance. This section presents the findings of this research within the proposed four-dimensional framework of *donor identity*: discursive, institutional, behavioural, and external. Each dimension reflects how the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland position themselves as actors in international development cooperation. The findings draw from data presented in the section above and aim to capture both self-representation and external positioning of these countries.

##### 4.1 Discursive dimension

The first dimension represents the framing and justification of the countries' donor role. Across all three countries, it is articulated through the language of transition experience, regional solidarity and shared historical memory. The Czech Republic and Slovakia often frame their activities as a moral responsibility, drawing on their successful democratic and economic transition and EU integration. While referencing its transformation experience, Poland leans more heavily on a regional security narrative, positioning itself as a stabilising actor, especially in Eastern Europe. All three CEE countries avoid mentioning global justice or colonial responsibility (or similar narratives), clearly distinguishing

themselves from traditional donors. Terms like solidarity, partnership and experience sharing are much more prominent. Discourse also reflects Europeanisation in their bilateral development policies, with OECD, EU, and UN terminology (e.g. SDGs, human rights, rule of law) embedded. Those are, however, often adapted to reflect domestic framing priorities, suggesting selective Europeanisation, and sometimes even resistance to OECD DAC discourse promoted by traditional donors.<sup>2</sup>

#### 4.2 Institutional dimension

This dimension reflects the structure, autonomy, and coordination of the institutional architecture of bilateral development policies. All three countries reveal varying capacities and autonomy of their development agencies from the MFAs. The division of labour is often considered not transparent or streamlined enough to allow for easy understanding and navigation by external actors. All three countries experienced changes in their institutional frameworks after joining OECD DAC to streamline and stabilise their activities. However, functional modifications are still needed in these institutional structures. The Czech policy is the most institutionalised of the three, with a degree of strategic autonomy comparable to Slovakia, though both operate with limited staff. In contrast, Polish policy, despite being fully embedded within the MFA and lacking a separate agency, has significantly expanded its resources and operational capacity over the past decade. Despite earlier struggles to formally align with EU standards, all three countries demonstrate multiannual programming, sectoral, and thematic coherence. However, major criticisms include persistently tied aid as national actors remain the primary implementers of activities, and little space is left for recipient countries to articulate their needs and influence policies. Moreover, within the EU Development Policy, national agencies remain implementers, rather than agenda-setters.

#### 4.3 Behavioural dimension

Considering aid allocation and geographic priorities of all three CEE countries, this part focuses on aid provision patterns to assess the behavioural dimension of their *donor identity*. Regarding volume, aid remains relatively modest (on the EU's lowest end of % of GNI). While previous assumptions referred to limited budgets and capacities as reasons for the countries not being able to meet the EU-set target of 0.7% of GNI, recent geopolitical events in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood suggest that when recipient countries' needs align with these donors' priorities, they can scale the provision of aid quickly and effectively. Long-term geographical patterns of aid provision show clear regional and thematic preferences for all three countries. Western Balkans and Eastern Europe dominate their bilateral development policies, reflecting geographic proximity, historical ties, strategic interests, and a perceived niche of their added value in the region, despite the OECD DAC recommendations to direct aid provision to the LDCs. The thematic focus revolves around supporting democracy, public administration reforms, and technical assistance, mirroring this self-perceived niche. At the same time, the general EU goal of promoting human rights to eradicate poverty remains stated reluctantly in official strategic documents. While the Czech Republic has expanded to selected African countries (based on the overall government's political priorities) and has increasingly engaged in multilateral projects, Poland and Slovakia remain more regionally concentrated.

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<sup>2</sup> Similar resistance of CEE countries to dominant EU narratives can also be observed in other policy areas, such as migration, although much more politicised (Csanyi and Kucharčík 2023).

#### 4.4 External dimension

The final dimension focuses on perceptions and positioning within the EU, OECD, and beyond. While trying to overcome obstacles such as inflexible operational structures or tied aid, they are often excluded from major policy-shaping decision-making, with their influence limited by smaller aid budgets, non-alignment with EU commitments and discourse, and shorter donor histories. This results in limited visibility, smaller-scale interventions, and countries' perceptions of the lack of competitiveness in the EU Development Policy. The aid of all three countries remains marginal within OECD DAC. Although increasingly active in peer reviews and knowledge-sharing platforms, their bilateral development policies are often viewed as small-scale and overly bureaucratic to access.

### 5 DISCUSSING THE ASPECTS OF DONOR IDENTITY

Overall, the findings suggest that CEE donors construct a distinct *donor identity* within the EU and OECD DAC frameworks – neither fully aligned with ‘traditional donor’ norms nor radically divergent from them. Given their integration into these structures and membership obligations, radically alternative positions were never expected. Their emphasis on partnership, solidarity, and democratic transformation, rooted in shared historical experience, and a strong regional focus, are the key features that set them apart.

Institutionally and behaviourally formally aligned with the EU and OECD DAC, they were able to find loopholes or ways to ignore or adapt these soft laws to pursue their own political and strategic interests. Externally not influential, they become increasingly recognised as reliable partners within the field of regional donors. While CEE countries have created space within EU development cooperation, their identity remains in a state of evolution. Although recently more dynamic, it is marked by agency and structural dependency on leading regional and sectoral actors.

Reflecting the existing frameworks on *donor identity*, while long considered donor-driven by their interests, it can be argued that they have become ‘hybrid’ (Smolaga and Zajackowski 2024). They are shaped by post-socialist legacies, structured through (or despite, in certain instances) Europeanisation, but constrained by limited resources, capacities and lack of flexible institutional arrangements accessible to external actors (including legal and institutional arrangements causing tied aid). The latter represents a resistance to change often mentioned in relation to national identity, once shaped by political consensus and institutionalised through socialisation, which presents Europeanisation and OECD DAC influence (Tulmets 2014; Lancaster 2006).

Regarding Kondoh’s (2015) aid models, CEE countries do not fit into his categories; however, a degree of similarity can be observed with the ‘superpower identity’. Although CEE countries most probably do not seek global influence or the setup of alternative norms in the international development aid landscape, they have been indirectly contesting the status quo.

An interesting connection can be made to Southern development actors as described by Mawdsley (2012), who also highlighted the problematic role of OECD DAC, a norm-maker created and shaped by ‘traditional donors’. Similarities can be observed in donors’ strategic positioning regarding the need for

reciprocity and in shaping their identity as donors, rather than just aid recipients. Although CEE countries cannot be considered Southern development actors, they share a level of reasoning for aid provision, mainly regarding transition and experience sharing. Furthermore, rejecting the solidarity narrative based on a legacy of shared colonial/postcolonial past leaves space for alternative partnership narrating (Mawdsley 2012; Alesina and Dollar 2000).

Contrary to Szent-Iványi's and Lightfoot's (2015) premise that '*nation states will adopt international norms and laws not because the costs of adoption outweigh the benefits, but because these rules become internalized and a conviction gradually develops that they represent the only proper way to act*', this article suggests that countries also desire to shape these policies as equal partners within a norm-setting landscape, even if they do not initially agree or align with them. Overall, it can be argued that the main obstacle to making a low-volume aid of CEE countries more effective is tied aid and putting their own strategic interests and benefits first (Bearce and Tirone 2010).

## 6 CONCLUSION

This article explores whether and how CEE countries construct a distinct *donor identity* within the EU development cooperation landscape. Drawing on existing research, although not always highly relevant to CEE countries, and adapting it into a four-dimensional framework, this article articulated a distinctive donor role represented by the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia. Grounded in democratic transition, regional partnerships and solidarity, and accenting non-colonial legitimacy, all three countries subtly contest existing OECD DAC and EU discourse. While formally aligned with their standards, all three countries frame their bilateral development policies through narratives and practices that reflect their unique historical trajectories and geopolitical positioning.

Rather than fully converging with traditional norms or challenging them outright, these CEE countries navigate a middle ground, asserting identity with constraints, carving out relevance in a crowded development field, and offering alternative legitimacy claims rooted in shared experience rather than past power. Their presence complicates assumptions about the EU's uniformity in development cooperation and reveals the nuanced ways the smaller Member States exert agency.

This article aims to introduce CEE countries' *donor identity* within academic research rather than putting them into a DAC donor 'box'. However, further research is necessary to explore the evolving positions and identities of CEE countries regarding development cooperation and to fill a gap in an underexplored field. Contributing to an evolving politics of development in a post-hegemonic world, this article aims to offer an insight into a reimagined development donor environment.

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## OD PREJEMNIKOV DO DONATORJEV: SREDNJA EVROPA IN RAZVOJNA POMOČ EU

Sredi svetovnih političnih napetosti so se srednjeevropske države, nekoč prejemnice pomoči Evropske unije, pod nadzorom EU in OECD pojavile kot donatorice. Članek, ki se opira na kritične pristope k evropeizaciji in identiteti donatorjev, za analizo uporablja štiridimenzionalni okvir identitete donatorjev (diskurzivnega, institucionalnega, vedenjskega in zunanjega) ter analizira kako Češka, Slovaška in Poljska oblikujejo svoje vloge v razvojni politiki EU. Čeprav se omenjene države formalno usklajujejo z normami EU in DAC, se pogosto upirajo tradicionalnemu modelu donatorjev, saj se opirajo na svoje postsocialistične izkušnje, pomanjkanje

*kolonialne dediščine ter poudarek na regionalni bližini in solidarnosti. Njihovo sodelovanje subtilno izziva prevladujoče razvojne narative, razkriva notranje napetosti in spregledane razlike med donatorji EU. Z opredelitvijo identitete donatorjev kot večdimenzionalnega in premalo raziskanega vidika razvojnih študij članek prispeva k raziskavam v Srednji in Vzhodni Evropi, evropeizaciji in razvijajoči se vlogi manjših držav EU v globalnem upravljanju razvoja.*

**Ključne besede:** identiteta donatorja; razvojno sodelovanje EU; postsocialistični donatorji; pomoč EU; donatorji razvojnih programov Srednje in Vzhodne Evrope.