



# Depoliticization, instrumentalization and legitimacy of Czech development cooperation: A case of imposed altruism?

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## ABSTRACT

This paper draws on James Ferguson's concept of 'anti-politics machine' and Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *illusio* to explore the nature of the international development cooperation programmes financed by the Czech government. It argues that its character as an 'anti-politics machine' turns development into a highly technical issue and dismisses essential political questions of global equity and policy coherence from the public debate. Moreover, the actors in the field of development cooperation are held in an *illusio*: they are required to appear as altruistic, which obscures their particular interests. This instrumentalization of development aid contributes to further isolation of the Czech development constituency and raises fundamental questions for the democratic legitimacy of development cooperation.

**Keywords:** Development cooperation, depoliticization, legitimacy, anti-politics machine, *illusio*, Czech Republic

## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article s'appuie sur les notions de « machine anti-politique » de James Ferguson et d'*illusio* de Pierre Bourdieu afin de révéler la nature de la coopération au développement financée par la République tchèque. L'article avance que son caractère de « machine anti-politique » transforme le développement en un sujet technique et évacue les problèmes politiques essentiels de justice globale et de cohérence de politiques du débat public. D'autre part, les acteurs dans le champ de la coopération du développement sont pris dans un *illusio* : étant censés apparaître comme altruistes, le soupçon sur leurs intérêts particuliers est écarté. Cette instrumentalisation de l'aide au développement contribue à une plus profonde isolation de la communauté des développeurs tchèques et pose des questions fondamentales sur la légitimité démocratique de la coopération du développement.

**Mots clés:** Coopération du développement, dépolitisation, légitimité, machine anti-politique, *illusio*, République tchèque

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## **RESUMEN**

Este artículo se apoya en la noción de “maquina anti-política” de James Ferguson y en el de *illusio de* Pierre Bourdieu con el fin de descubrir la naturaleza de la cooperación al desarrollo de la República checa. El artículo argumenta que el carácter de “maquina anti-política” de aquélla transforma el desarrollo en un sujeto técnico y excluye del debate público los problemas políticos esenciales relacionados con la justicia global y con la coherencia de políticas. Por otro lado, los actores en el campo de la cooperación al desarrollo son presa de una ilusión: se les pide que aparezcan como altruistas, de tal manera que esconden sus intereses particulares. Esta instrumentalización de la ayuda al desarrollo contribuye a un mayor aislamiento de la comunidad de practicantes del desarrollo y plantea algunas cuestiones fundamentales sobre la legitimidad de la cooperación al desarrollo de la República Checa.

**Palabras claves:** cooperación al desarrollo, depolitización, legitimidad, máquina anti-política, *illusio*, República Checa

**JEL Classification:** P33, P45

## **INTRODUCTION**

Development cooperation is not a new issue area of Czech foreign policy. The fact that Czechoslovakia was not part of the Western bloc during the Cold War does not mean, however, that it was immune to the post-World War II development discourse. If the antagonist discourses of Marxism-Leninism and democratic liberalism opposed one another, both had in common their faith in economic growth, technical progress and industrialization. Both competing camps also shared their political and commercial interests in Africa, Asia and Latin America, so that the practices of Western and Eastern development experts in the Third World were much more similar than the opposing ideologies might suggest. But when in 1990 the communist discourse in the East lost its legitimacy and the corresponding regime based on political violence and the military presence of the Soviet Union lost its power over the Czechoslovak citizens, the country cut all development aid, on which it was spending up to 1% of its gross national income (GNI) (Halaxa and Lebeda, 1998). By the time of the Czech-Slovak split in 1993, the nations were immersed in the domestic political, economic and social transition, and assistance to the South was reduced to contributions to international organizations, humanitarian aid and scholarships for students from the South.

Changes of political regimes often bring a mirror-like reaction from the society. The discredited communist discourse included ‘friendship’ with the developing countries ‘on the road to socialism’. It was replaced by Western liberal discourse with almost

the same emphasis. The majority of the Czech population lost confidence in income redistribution and state interventions in the economy, the principles on which development cooperation has been at least partly grounded. It was only during a later stage of transition that the Czech Republic entered the 'the club of the rich', the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), engaged with the Bretton Woods institutions and associated with the European Union (EU). The country has officially aligned to liberal global development discourse and it accepted – as a part of the accession package – international commitments to deliver development aid again.

The Czech government has accordingly created institutions and allocated budget for development projects in the South, but internal political will and public awareness on global issues have remained low. Moreover, as private donorship is weak, many non-governmental development organizations (NGDOs) are heavily dependent on government funding and they do not represent grassroots initiatives, organizations and movements. In the Czech society, aid-giving is almost seen as the unique way of contributing to the development of the South, and within the tiny aid debate, quantity and not quality of aid is seen as the most important challenge. Even so, the Czech proportion of the volume of official development aid hardly surpasses 0.1 % of the world total (see OECD, 2009). Statistics suggest that Czech aid is negligible from a global perspective, but the annual volume of official development aid spent by the Czech Republic still represents some 150 million euros, i.e., 0.14 % of the Czech GNI. This sum is important from the domestic perspective and it keeps alive a vivid development constituency – the body of actors that implement, formulate or participate in the formulation of Czech development cooperation.

At first sight, the Czechs seem to have taken on board the underlying values and culture of the contemporary global discourse on poverty reduction in the South. The liberal type of discourse based on the Millennium Development Goals prevails not only in the political space and in media, but also in civil society, and even in academia. The critics of Czech development cooperation agree that its direction is good despite that efforts are inadequate since the government does not spend enough money on development cooperation. Many external actors that questioned the effectiveness of Czech aid have been satisfied by the recent institutional centralization of policy-making at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the creation of a development agency in 2009. However, they do not pay attention to the uninterrupted practices that promote particular interests of the Czech development actors. This consensus in the perception of development aid is surprising. Above all, the Czech development discourse is taken for a true representation of the practices on the ground as if the declarations on helping the poor etc. were more important than the actual results of development cooperation. There is little evidence about the impact of Czech aid as evaluations are missing or unpublished, but the message of

the self-confident slogan ‘The Czech Republic helps’, which makes part of the logo of the Czech Development Agency, seems to be shared by the whole constituency.

The missing deliberation of the Czech society on development cooperation and development as such raises more general and fundamental questions about the democratic legitimacy of the development constituency. In order to refine the diagnosis and analyze its causes, this paper starts by presenting a theoretical framework inspired by the Foucauldian concept of ‘depoliticization’. It argues that James Ferguson’s (1997) concept of ‘anti-politics machine’ is also relevant to the development apparatus of a medium-sized re-emerging donor in the North. Secondly, Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of ‘*illusio*’ helps to define development cooperation as a field in which actors have an interest in presenting themselves as altruistic, and consequently, suspicion of development actors’ egoistic interests is evaded (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Bourdieu, 1994). The final part of this paper briefly analyzes the consequent relative isolation of the development constituency from the rest of the society and gives directions for further research. Finally, the paper draws consequences from the lack of democratic legitimacy in Czech development cooperation.

### **DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AS AN ‘ANTI-POLITICS MACHINE’**

The current Czech development discourse is characterized by the frequent identification between what the members of the Czech development constituency do and say in the name of development. It has to be resolved by an ‘epistemological break’ (Bachelard, 1970), in other words noting the risk of “replacing reality for pre-constructed objects existing within and through everyday language.” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 37). This principle concerns not only the oral expression of the actors, but particularly the ‘documentary reality’ created by their institutions (Smith, 1974). Ontologically, development and development cooperation are not notions that would immediately correspond to the reality, but they have their own history and they entertain a complex relation with the practices. Discourses participate in the creation of social reality and allow or prohibit social practices (e.g. development aid). This direction is not, however, the only one possible: social practices retrospectively influence the discourses that legitimize the practices (e.g. the division between developed and developing countries). I build, therefore, on the later work of Michel Foucault (1975, 1976), initially applied in the area of development by Arturo Escobar (1995) and Gilbert Rist (2001) at macro level. However, as a study of a specific development constituency, the book *The Anti-politics Machine: ‘Development,’ Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* by James Ferguson (1997) represents the most valuable input. In contrast to his predecessors, Ferguson puts more emphasis on practices, but at the same time, he does neither

disconnect them from international development discourse nor does he reduce development cooperation to practices alone, as does the anthropologist Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (1995).

Concerning the example of a rural development project implemented by the World Bank and the Canadian International Development Agency (ACDI/CIDA) in Thaba-Tseka region from 1975 to 1984, Ferguson has shown that “the causes of poverty in Lesotho are political and structural (not technical and geographical), that the national government is part of the problem (not a neutral instrument for its solution)” (Ferguson, 1997, p. 69). The World Bank has excluded from its technical analysis the political structures of Basotho society, labour migration into surrounding South Africa and the seemingly irrational surplus of cattle, related to cultural tradition and gender relations. The costly project funded by the World Bank and CIDA, the Canadian International Development Agency, was intended to increase livestock production, introduce new crops and improve local infrastructure. However, it met resistance from the local population and it did not lead to poverty reduction, but instead it only strengthened the power of the central government over the political opposition in Thaba-Tseka. That is why Ferguson labelled the project in Lesotho an “anti-politics machine”:

By uncompromisingly reducing poverty to a technical problem, and by promising technical solutions to the sufferings of powerless and oppressed people, the hegemonic problematic of ‘development’ is the principal means through which the question of poverty is de-politicized in the world today. At the same time, by making the intentional blueprints for ‘development’ so highly visible, a ‘development’ project can end up performing extremely sensitive political operations involving the entrenchment and expansion of institutional state power almost invisibly, under cover of a neutral, technical mission to which no one can object. (Ferguson, 1997, p. 256).

Ferguson’s analysis is inspired by Foucault’s (1975) critique of prison: like the World Bank’s apparatus in Lesotho, the prison does not help to reintegrate criminals, but rather, it seems to lead to recidivism. Despite its meagre success, the prison transforms the political problem of legitimacy and illegitimacy into the seemingly technical problem of delinquency, and adds the institutions of re-education and control. Analogically, the Thaba-Tseka project has transformed the political problem of poverty, related to the South African apartheid labour market, into a technical problem, but eventually it resulted in the stronger control of the Basotho population by its authoritarian government.

The concept of ‘anti-politics machine’ has a background in political philosophy, but it has not otherwise found application outside the anthropology of development, and infrequently, development theory (see De Vries, 2007). It has inspired research on environmental resource management in Malaysia (Brosius, 1999) and urban agriculture in Cameroon (Page, 2002), and more generally, development

interventions in pre-genocide Rwanda (Uvin, 1998). Paul Nadasdy (2005) has described the depoliticization of development intervention in the North, but still from the perspective of an internal colonization, in the case of a wildlife management project in an aboriginal area of Yukon. Only recently has the concept of depoliticization gained the attention of scholars in relation to the rise of “governance” (Hout and Robinson, 2009). But the anti-political machine is not limited to the *field* of development projects in the South and North. I argue that the Czech development constituency shares the Fergusonian character of ‘anti-politics machine’. Development cooperation, which was primarily based on the need to honour international commitments, was reduced to a technical concern for aid volume and institutional settings; it displaces the issues of global governance and policy coherence with other government policies.

Some objections have been raised against Ferguson’s concept. In relation to Czech development cooperation, it is important to emphasize that, according to Ferguson, the development apparatus does not necessarily mean “bureaucratic state power”, but it can also encompass “bureaucratic power” *tout court* (Ferguson, 1997, p. 273), and even “bureaucratic non-state power” as Foucauldian “governmentality” is not necessarily exclusively performed by the state (Williams, 2004, p. 564). It is hence relevant also to the NGDOs that make part of the development constituency. Moreover, Glynn Williams contests the claim that the outcome of a development intervention is always necessarily depoliticizing. While I agree that depoliticization will be the most frequent outcome of a development intervention, the strategies of the local actors are not predicable and they can lead to their greater political involvement as well. These possible unpredicted outcomes are discussed in the last part of the paper in relation to the paradoxical role of the EU in Czech development policy.

### **DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AS A SEEMINGLY DISINTERESTED FIELD**

In order to comprehend the Czech development constituency, the Foucauldian framework alone is insufficient. There is indeed a blind spot regarding the motivations of the actors. In his analysis of the World Bank’s project in Lesotho, Ferguson asks *how* the donor uses a misplaced technical and geographic jargon in the identification of development needs instead of dealing with economic and political issues, and *what* the projects do in the field. However, he does not consider *why* the international organization does so and he deliberately leaves this question to further research. He does not pay attention to the motivations and strategies of the ‘developers’. I consider the scrutiny of the interests of the Czech development actors as a meaningful and complementary objective. Indeed, the actors may use the

external discourse for defending their particular actual interests, unacceptable in a given field, which may remain hidden even for themselves.

The ‘developers’ are not necessarily determined by the dominant discourse to accept the values which make part of the discourse. Quite the opposite, the ‘culture of development cooperation’ may be used by them as a ‘tool kit’ from which they choose elements for their strategies and instrumentalize it for their particular needs (Swidler, 1986). Taking the declared altruistic motivations of the actors for the real interests would mean to yield to the illusion of the game, on which development aid is grounded. As Pierre Bourdieu claims, ‘generally, but especially in some universes such as the scientific field (*champ*), it is more advantageous to appear as disinterested, benevolent and altruistic, than as egoist. (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 166). The field of development cooperation represents without doubts a social field in which the actors succumb to the *illusio* in both economic and psychological aspects.<sup>1</sup>

According to Bourdieu, researchers are not aware enough of their “scholastic point of view“, and this is why they spread methodological individualism outside the economic field as a consequence of the missing reflection of their own methods. In fact they put the scholar in the machine (*savant dans la machine*), they project their conscious decisions, which constitute part of their own reflection on the behaviour of the actors, and they forget that their own actions are influenced by the scientific *habitus*. At the same time, Bourdieu warns against the opposite perspective of researchers bluntly accepting the perception of the actors as those may be, for example, superstitions and prejudices (Bourdieu, 1982). The Bourdieuian articulation of the problem agency-structure, does not, hence, prohibit the questioning of the behaviour of individual actors, and completes the Foucauldian framework.

Bourdieu has been criticized for his use of *illusio*, as overestimating the scientist’s ability to uncover the rules of the game in a specified field, and at the same time, downgrading the anticipation of the agent for the rare occasions of crisis (Costay, 2005). This bias would be due to his ideal-typical approach, limiting the complexity and coexistence of different logics of action within a given field. The economic interest, or economic calculus as understood by the Chicago school, remains limited particularly to the economic field (Boyer, 2003). But that would be to forget that many subfields lay in between major fields like the political and economic field. The field of development cooperation is not free of economic interest. The NGOs are dependent on the government and they have to write budget proposals or respond to tenders.

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<sup>1</sup> *Illusio* is the “magical relation to the game that is a result of the relation of ontological complicity between mental structures and the objective structures of social space” (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 151), or as Paul Costey (2005, p. 14) put it, the compatibility between the mental schemes of *habitus* and the properties of a social field (*champ*).

Consequently, development assistance (and humanitarian aid particularly) can be seen as the explanation taboo (*tabou de l'explication*) in the economy of symbolic exchanges and of the gift especially (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 181). For example, the uneasy “laugh of bishops”, elicited when the problem of funding the church is mentioned by the sociologist, uncovers that both economic and religious logics are present in the church, but the introduction of the financial perspective ‘kills’ the religious talk that excludes material concerns (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 204). The explanations that break the taboos and deconstruct the symbolic values by the mere fact of analysis are a difficult case for the scientist, especially if they are shared by the majority of the society. Similarly, the actors involved in the field of development cooperation are held to be rather altruistic, as they are ‘helping the poor’, even though they are situated in a field which is not empty of the economic calculus. The explanation taboo in humanitarian and development cooperation deflects the suspicion of society at large from the importance of economic and political concerns shared by the development constituency. The latter are held by this gambit and they may be unaware of the entirety of the situation as well.<sup>2</sup> The silence over the particular interests of the actors and their dependence upon the state strengthens the self-enforcing ‘anti-politics machine’ of Czech development cooperation.

#### **THE RELATIVE ISOLATION OF THE DEVELOPMENT CONSTITUENCY: AN OUTLINE**

As both theoretical contributions suggest, not only does the Czech development constituency depoliticize development aid, at the same time it makes use of it to fulfil its foreign policy, security and commercial interests. The purpose of this part of the paper is not to analyze these interests in detail, but to present some evidence as a base for further empirical research. Overall, it appears that the ‘liberty’ of the constituency is connected to the lack of public control over policy: one strengthens the other in a cumulative causation. The non-state sector appreciates this situation as far as it allows it to implement projects in the South – which may of course contribute to poverty reduction, but only in the short term as the ‘anti-politics machine’ does not require public support that would increase the importance of global development on the domestic political agenda. In addition to this, the NGOs are kept in an ‘explication taboo’, they are not necessarily aware of their bias and the public assumes them to be altruistic as well. Due to low private donorship, civil society in post-communist countries is highly dependent on public finance and it seldom plays the role of a watchdog. For example, the Czech NGO platform has

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<sup>2</sup> More precisely, “le fait d’être investi, pris dans le jeu et par le jeu”, in the original version (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 64).

repeatedly toned down policy recommendations to the government in drafts of its own reports.

As a consequence, NGDOs almost exclusively call on the government to increase the development budget at the expense of honouring qualitative commitments, and this contributes further to the depoliticization of development cooperation. On the other hand, the government frequently publicizes the projects of the NGDOs in the South, which are more focused on poverty reduction than is the case for the government-funded projects that are implemented by the private sector. The latter often play the role of indirect export subsidies and their development impacts could hardly be appealing to the general public. In any case, with the uncritical acceptance of international development discourse by the Czech Republic, the political issues of social change in the developing world are transformed into a problem that can be solved by technical instruments.

Other cross-cutting issues such as gender, environment or cultural dialogue are largely absent as well. Perhaps most importantly, policy coherence for development has not been addressed so far. Along with improved coordination of Czech aid with other donors and strengthening responsibility towards the partner countries, policy coherence is indeed the most important challenge the North faces in terms of development policy (Grimm et al., 2008). Indeed, slight changes in agricultural or trade policy, for example, may affect poverty more significantly than a substantial change in development cooperation. The narrow understanding of development and ignorance of the incoherence of policies cannot be overcome without the involvement in the development constituency of new actors from the public sector. The existing inter-ministerial Council for Foreign Development Cooperation has a mandate for this task and it offers an ideal initial forum for dealing with coherence and cross-cutting issues, but its activity has been limited to aid (Horký, 2010).

But the impetus for broadening the development constituency will hardly come from inside that constituency, which naturally tends to reproduce discourses and practices. The increasing instrumentalization of development aid for foreign policy objectives that arose after the centralization of decisions at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2008 and the focus on security did not lead to any reaction from civil society. It must be acknowledged, however, that under the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU in the first half of 2009, Czech NGDOs and their platforms promoted new global issues, especially pertaining to the structural causes of the global financial and economic crisis. Very often, their activities were supported from outside by the European Commission and other member states. Paradoxically, this positive trend of repoliticization has somehow diverted attention from domestic issues. This outline gives only an incomplete picture of the Czech development constituency and its relation with Czech society. Further research should focus especially on the exact role of the NGDOs that are closer to the government than to grassroots organizations and private donors, and hence disconnected from the civil society at large.

## **CONCLUSION: DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMACY AND REPOLITICIZATION OF DEVELOPMENT**

The case of Czech development cooperation points out the general ambivalence toward social change in Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic after 1989 when, for a while, the future development of the Czech society became a subject of lively political and public debates, before succumbing to the dominant ‘return to the West’ and ‘return to Europe’ narrative. But Europe and the West have changed meanwhile. The Czech development constituency tries to respond to two challenges at the same time: to catch up with the experienced donor countries and possibly to react to new global developments afterwards. The objective of development policy is hence unstable, ever-changing and seemingly receding, but the country still relies on a linear vision of history and tries to elevate on the East-West slope (Melegh, 2006), where the ‘Westness’ corresponds to the ideal of liberal democracy and high economic development while the remaining customs and cultural differences from Western Europe are seen as an expression of a lower, backward ‘Eastness’.

The postcolonial analysis of the ‘Eastern’ enlargement of the European Union has also offered a unique insight in the working of these mechanisms (Böröcz and Kovács, 2001). During the process of EU accession, candidate countries had to accept the body of EU law, the *acquis communautaire*, without reservation. Otherwise, they would be denied membership and they would not be perceived as truly ‘European’. The direction of their development was defined *ex ante* and the public discussion concerned the ways to ‘catch up with Europe’ rather than the goal itself. In consequence, the experience of political and economic transition, which could have brought alternative vision to development based on the specificity of the socialist experience, has still not undergone sufficient social reflection. How would it then be possible to deviate from the linear East-West slope and repoliticize development cooperation?

This paper criticizes Czech development cooperation, but to be clear, it does not deny its role. As James Ferguson put it: “Would we say that the vivisection of a frog constitutes a critique? Or that it aims to ‘refute’ the frog’s organs?” (Ferguson, 1997, p. xiv-xvi). Abandoning bilateral cooperation is not an alternative. Even if multilateral aid was more effective, outsourcing development to Brussels, Geneva, New York or Washington would eventually disconnect Czech society from the practices of development in the South and the consequent reduction in public awareness and would collapse the democratic legitimacy of Czech aid deliberation. The opening of the development constituency within a broader political space would result in making development a commonly debated issue within the political parties and civil society, not one discussed exclusively among experts and directly involved

NGDOs. This proposition is paradoxical since repoliticization is not entirely attainable through technical means. Nevertheless, it can be attained by redirecting a part of the developing budget from export subsidies, covered as development aid, to provision of development education and awareness for the general public, politicians, media, and civil society at large. Paradoxically, it is the funding from the European Union to non-state actors, a regional body that is often seen as less political than its member states, that allows putting these issues slowly on the political agenda.

Any public support of 'disinterested' activities hides serious contradictions, but the state can support even those who criticize it. Whether this support will lead to politicization or depoliticization is never defined *ex ante*. At the same time, there is a risk of replacing the 'anti-politics machine' by an 'anti-foreign policy' (Chandler, 2007), a narcissist policy, which would eventually overlook the ultimate recipients of development cooperation, i.e. poor women, men and children. This pertains not only to the Czech Republic, but to other donors as well. With the Paris Declaration, donor governments have started – at least in their discourse – to focus on partnership, ownership and responsibility to the citizens of partner countries. But at the same time, some seem to have forgotten to consider these values in respect to their own citizens. Development cooperation that is not democratically rooted in both the North and South is unsustainable. Development aid which is – as in the Czech case – a product of an imposed altruism and a side-effect of Westernization and Europeanization, cannot be effective in the long term. For a country which self-identifies as developed, it would only serve as a placebo.

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