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RESEARCH

Technical Socialization in International Development Cooperation: Explaining Creative Compliance in Hungary's Foreign Aid Policy

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Abstract

Theories of international socialization and Europeanization have frequently been used to explain changes in international development policies (IDPs) in aid donor countries. While this literature agrees that international pressure usually has only limited impact, there remains a lack of understanding around situations where states adopt certain, often only technical, international norms, but disregard other, more political ones. The paper uses the case of Hungary's IDP, an unlikely candidate for international socialization. While the rhetoric and practice of Hungary's IDP reflected the Orbán government's nationalist-conservative ideology, the influence of the EU and the OECD DAC was also identifiable. After 2020, Hungary implemented many technical reforms to conform with recommendations from these bodies, including strengthening legislation, increasing transparency, and improving financial and tendering processes. These changes can be explained by cost-benefit analysis and 'creative compliance': Hungary hoped to gain financial benefits through greater access to EU funds, without compromising on government ideology.

Keywords International development policy · Socialization · Hungary

Résumé

Les théories de la socialisation internationale et de l'européanisation ont fréquemment été mobilisées pour expliquer l'évolution des politiques de développement

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international (PDI) dans les pays donateurs d'aide. Si la littérature s'accorde à reconnaître que les pressions internationales n'ont généralement qu'une incidence limitée, les raisons pour lesquelles les États adoptent certaines normes internationales, souvent de nature purement technique, tout en en négligeant d'autres, davantage politiques, restent mal comprises. Cet article examine le cas de la PDI de la Hongrie, pays pourtant peu susceptible de se prêter à une socialisation internationale. Si le discours et la pratique de la PDI hongroise reflétaient l'idéologie nationaliste-conservatrice du gouvernement Orbán, l'influence de l'UE et du Comité d'aide au développement (CAD) de l'OCDE était également perceptible. Après 2020, la Hongrie a mis en œuvre de nombreuses réformes techniques afin de se conformer aux recommandations de ces organisations, notamment en renforçant sa législation, en accroissant la transparence et en améliorant les procédures financières et d'appel d'offres. Ces évolutions peuvent s'expliquer par une analyse coûts-avantages et par une « conformité créative » : la Hongrie espérait obtenir des avantages financiers grâce à un meilleur accès aux fonds de l'UE, sans transiger sur l'idéologie gouvernementale.

Resumen
Las teorías de la socialización internacional y la europeización se han utilizado con frecuencia para explicar los cambios en las políticas de desarrollo internacional (PDI) de los países donantes de ayuda. Aunque esta literatura coincide en que la presión internacional suele tener un impacto limitado, aún no se comprenden bien las situaciones en las que los Estados adoptan determinadas normas internacionales, a menudo de carácter meramente técnico, pero desatienden otras de índole más política. El artículo analiza el caso de la PDI de Hungría, un candidato poco probable para la socialización internacional. Si bien la retórica y la práctica de la PDI húngara reflejaban la ideología nacionalista-conservadora del Gobierno de Orbán, también era posible identificar la influencia de la UE y del CAD de la OCDE. Después de 2020, Hungría puso en marcha numerosas reformas técnicas para ajustarse a las recomendaciones de estos organismos, entre ellas el refuerzo de la legislación, el aumento de la transparencia y la mejora de los procesos financieros y de licitación. Estos cambios pueden explicarse mediante un análisis de costes y beneficios y el «cumplimiento creativo»: Hungría esperaba obtener beneficios financieros gracias a un mayor acceso a los fondos de la UE, sin renunciar a la ideología gubernamental.

JEL classification F35 · F53

Introduction

International development policy (IDP) serves a wide range of political goals for donors, including reducing spillovers associated with global poverty, curbing migration, building alliances, promoting exports and expressing solidarity. The need to accommodate so many different goals implies that IDP is driven by a multitude of donor interests. These interests are constructed through the donor's political pro-



cesses involving complex interplays between decision makers, domestic interest groups, public opinion, political narratives and ideologies. International norm setters and norm entrepreneurs, including inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations, also attempt to influence these policies. Among these international sources of influence, the European Union (EU) has undoubtedly received the most attention: the 2010s saw a burst of research examining its impacts on the IDPs of member states (Olsen, 2013; Lightfoot & Szent-Iványi, 2014; Orbie & Carbone, 2017). Other international norm entrepreneurs, such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC), have received less attention, but have also shaped the IDPs of their members (Lim, 2014). The EU and the DAC have both aimed to persuade members to increase the amounts of development assistance they provide and its effectiveness in combatting global poverty. The behaviour of aid actors, and as a result, the power relations among them, are increasingly ordered not only by politics, norms and principles, but also by 'regulations, directives, standards, guidelines, and codes of conduct and ethics' (Kuldova, 2022: v-vi).

The literature however concludes that these efforts to 'socialize' states into complying with internationally accepted norms in IDP have had limited success. Impacts of international socialization, or in the case of EU, 'Europeanization', on IDPs have been 'shallow', and donors 'reluctant' to shape their policies along international norms and guidelines (Orbie & Lightfoot, 2017). At the same time, the ascendancy of populist radical right parties (PRRPs) has been accompanied by discernible efforts to contest established IDP norms and incorporate right-wing preferences, most notably around cutting migration (Bergmann et al., 2024). Successful norm adoption in the past has generally happened in cases where there was already a strong resonance between domestic interests and these norms, or when domestic institutions or interest groups were able to use international norms strategically to bolster their bargaining positions with government (Szent-Iványi & Lightfoot, 2016). The literature has generally excluded the possibility of socialization in 'hostile' environments, i.e. where government interests (often framed as the 'national interest') were opposed to international development norms (Carbone & Quartapelle, 2017). There is however some indication that the picture is more nuanced. Norms are not equal: some are more technical while others are more political. Donors may be more willing to adopt relatively technical norms, as doing so is politically less costly. Furthermore, when government agencies are relatively autonomous and there is no high-level political direction, IDP may better match international norms which emphasize development needs as opposed to donor interests (Arel-Bundock et al., 2015). This can lead to situations of 'technical socialization', when states focus on adopting the more technical aspects of international norms and disregard the more political ones. The exact details of how and under what circumstances this can happen remain poorly understood.

The goal of this paper therefore is to explain technical socialization in IDP. The key question is how socialization can happen on the technical level of IDP, but not on the political level. To explore this, the paper uses the case study of Hungary's IDP. Hungary may seem a surprising choice: under Viktor Orbán's governments between 2010 and 2026, the country was as a least likely case for international socialization, and especially Europeanization. Indeed, as discussed in the introduction to this spe-

cial issue, Central and Eastern Europe, as part of the *European semiperiphery*, has resisted Europeanization in IDP. But this resistance was even broader in the case of Hungary: Orbán's right-wing governments had enacted a number of policies and practices that went against the spirit and at times rules of the EU, and had waged a rhetorical war against 'Brussels', portraying it as an entity hijacked by global elites. Hungary's resistance also targeted 'Western' values, such as liberal democracy, individual human rights, transparency, accountability, and diversity. The government was also hostile towards the politically active segments of Hungarian civil society (Romaniuk, 2021).

In terms of IDP, Hungary emerged as the largest bilateral donor in Central and Eastern Europe in the early 2020s: the share of its official development assistance (ODA) in gross national income peaked at 0.28% in 2021, by far the highest among its regional peers. Despite this increase in funding, much of Hungary's IDP was not seen to align with the norms promoted by the EU and the DAC, especially regarding aid effectiveness and the non-discrimination of recipients (OECD, 2023). Embracing the idea of assisting persecuted Christian communities, the government also doubted the merits of certain humanitarian principles, especially neutrality (Paragi, 2023).

The paper analyses reforms in Hungary's IDP in the early 2020s and identifies a number of technical changes which were consistent with international norms: legal, institutional and policy reforms which attempted to create greater transparency, more predictable funding, and implement monitoring and evaluation practices. Based on the analysis of legal sources, various documents and interviews with civil servants and other stakeholders, we argue that these changes were generally driven by the need to 'appease' international norm entrepreneurs, especially the DAC, and to ensure compliance with the EU's requirements around 'pillar assessment', which would have brought direct financial benefits. However, the reforms did not challenge the spirit of Hungary's international development policy on a political level.

These results show that while some socialization is possible in 'hostile' political environments, these may rather be driven by rational cost-benefit analysis and not policy makers actually accepting that international norms in IDP represent the 'appropriate' way to act. This finding holds significant lessons for this special issue regarding the position of countries on the European semiperiphery between the Global North and the Global East. In a way, Hungarian IDP was characteristic of the European semiperiphery due to an interesting dichotomy: on the procedural-compliance level there was an aim to technically adapt the established norms of IDP, while on the strategic-political level the mainstream understandings of norms were contested. Hungary, even though it had affirmed itself as a DAC member donor, and thus part of the Global North, contested the 'mainstream way' of doing IDP. It adapted some of the trappings of these norms, but did so instrumentally, and the emerging policy, while equally paternalistic towards the Global South, was heavily laced with ideology and the emphasis on benefits for the donor. Hungary has also made attempts to upload its resistance to 'Western' IDP to the EU level, but examining this is not a goal of this paper (see e.g. Bergmann et al., 2024 on this).

The paper is structured as follows. The subsequent section provides the analytical framework for the paper, based on international socialization and Europeanization. This is followed by a brief summary of the paper's data collection methods and a



presentation of Hungary's IDP. The subsequent sections analyse the recent reforms in the policy and the drivers behind these, while the final section offers concluding remarks.

International Socialization and Europeanization

International socialization refers to a broad family of mechanisms which aim to explain how ways of behaviour spread between countries. These mechanisms generally assume that a norm 'leader', often an international organization, aims to socialize states into adopting certain norms (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998), which can include relatively softer norms and legally binding rules. The EU's role as a norm leader has especially received attention, leading to specific applications of international socialization using the concepts of Europeanization (Börzel & Risse, 2000) or more recently when it comes to legislation, the 'Brussels Effect' (Bradford, 2020).

The two main approaches to international socialization and specifically Europeanization consist of a rationalist approach focusing on costs and benefits, and a constructivist approach which places social learning at its core. The rationalist approach argues that states will adopt international norms if the benefits of doing so outweigh the costs. Developed in its fullest to explain Central and Eastern Europe's (CEE) EU accession (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005, 2019), it argues that the EU sets specific requirements for states, such as the adoption of norms or laws, and provides a reward to the country if it meets these. Rewards can include access to funding, trade benefits, and EU membership. Whether the country actually adopts the norms in question depends on how clearly the requirements are formulated, as well as the size, nature and credibility of the reward. Withholding rewards (or threatening with sanctions) however 'can only work if the costs of non-compliance exceed the costs of compliance' (Blauberger & Hüllen, 2021: 5). There are also domestic determinants of norm adoption, most importantly around the costs that the country would have to bear when adopting the norms: these can be substantial, especially if deeply entrenched informal institutions need to be transformed (Buscaneanu & Li, 2024). These costs can be financial, but often they are also political, such as a decline in the government's public support or conflicts with powerful interest groups and veto players (Orbie & Carbone, 2017).

The constructivist approach, social learning, stipulates that states will adopt international norms because they gradually develop a conviction that they represent the only 'appropriate' way to act (de Flers & Müller, 2011). Whether this kind of internalization actually happens, partly depends on the norms themselves: how 'legitimate' are they seen by the country, both in terms of their substance and the process through which they were created (Kollai, 2023), and how much they resonate with the prior beliefs of decision makers. The increasing influence of PRRPs has brought challenges regarding this, who question how much norms created by international elites actually resonate with the 'will of the people'. This dynamic has complicated European level decision making (Ripoll Servent & Zaun, 2024) and the subsequent diffusion of norms. On the other hand, however, norm adaptation may become more likely if there are norm entrepreneurs who champion and promote them, such as



inter-governmental organizations or non-governmental pressure groups. Furthermore, more frequent interactions between national and international policy makers provide increased opportunities for norm internalization (Lightfoot & Szent-Iványi, 2014). The internal policy discourse also matters: socialization is more likely if these focus on shared values rather than efficiencies and material interests (Panagiotatou, 2026).

Although the rationalist approach and social learning are based on different epistemologies, some have argued that the two are complementary (Checkel, 2005; Sedelmeier, 2011). This can lead to many crucial insights. Even if rational cost-benefit analysis may prejudice against adopting certain norms, policy makers may still gradually accept these, leading to a change in their beliefs over time. Or, vice-versa: although it would be in the country's rational interest to adopt a norm, this may be resisted by policy makers with whom it does not resonate. While the EU's enlargement strategy leading up to the 2004, 2007 and 2013 enlargement rounds demonstrates substantial successes, there are arguments that compliance from candidate countries was in part driven by rational decisions to comply, rather than genuine socialization into a normative order (Lovec et al., 2021: 903). The EU transferred around 80 000 pages of rules to CEE countries (Bruszt, 2015), who saw it in their rational interest to accept these to gain accession to the bloc, but it was only natural that not all of these rules resonated, leading to the post-accession rejection of some. While the rejection of EU norms can be seen as an attempt by some CEE states to reinforce their own identities (Lovec et al., 2021), it also resulted in situations which Bátory (2016) termed 'creative compliance', where states obeyed the letter of the law (for instance the single market rules), but not its spirit (the liberal democratic norms underpinning these). In situations like this, skilled civil servants 'can facilitate the appearance of rule-conforming behaviour that may run counter to the EU's intended policy goal' (Lindstrom, 2020: 1791). In the case of Hungary, creative compliance met its limits from 2022, when EU institutions began holding the Orbán government accountable on reforms which addressed its core policies, such as on LGBTQ rights. These were however non-negotiable due to their electoral centrality and political costs for the government, outweighing economic penalties (Koranyi, 2025).

International socialization, and especially Europeanization, has been used frequently to explain international development policy trajectories in donors. Membership in the EU and the DAC have been seen as the two main sources of socialization in IDP: both organizations are important norm creators in the field. The EU has created a vast body of primarily soft law around how member states should behave in international development, including targets on the amounts of ODA they should give, how they should give it, and to whom (Szent-Iványi & Lightfoot, 2015). The DAC also has a long history of proposing recommendations around ODA levels and aid effectiveness, much in the same vein as the EU. Furthermore, the DAC regularly peer reviews the development policies of its members, providing public scrutiny which identifies best practice and calls out non-compliance (Verschaeve & Orbie, 2016). This practice of 'naming and shaming' means that the DAC is not only a norm creator, but more broadly a norm entrepreneur which actively seeks to promote norm compliance by imposing reputational costs. While discourses around IDP norms have shifted due to the increasing influence of PRRPs, who see foreign aid either as a



wasteful luxury, a tool to combat migration or a battleground of identity politics (Bergmann et al., 2024), the EU and DAC norms still bear moral weight due to their emphasis on making IDP more effective in reducing poverty in the Global South.

Unlike in some other policy areas (such as trade), very few of the norms and rules promoted by the EU and the DAC in IDP are legally binding. Nor are there prospects for strong rewards such as financial benefits or something akin to full membership as during the EU accession process. Rewards for norm adoption tend to be less tangible, such as greater prestige, influence, or soft power. This means that the relevance of the rationalist approach is lower, and social learning emerges as the more important channel (Lightfoot & Szent-Iványi, 2014). The literature has found that Europeanization in IDP has mostly been 'shallow' (Horký, 2012; Orbie & Carbone, 2017) or member states 'reluctant' (Lightfoot & Szent-Iványi, 2014), or it was member states that shaped EU policies and norms, rather than the EU shaping members (Olsen, 2013). Shallow Europeanization has generally been driven by strong pre-existing development policy identities (such as in the case of the Nordic countries, see Olsen, 2013; Elgström & Delputte, 2017), or divergent government priorities driven by domestic politics (Carbone & Quartapelle, 2017; Koch & Molenaers, 2017). 'Naming and shaming' through the DAC's peer reviews has been seen to have some impact (Ashoff, 2013), as member states tend to implement many of the recommendations in these reviews. However, it is unclear whether these are ones which address only a specific issue, or more fundamental ones, and it is also a question whether it was the recommendations which prompted reform, or whether they were merely 'additional factors' (Ashoff, 2013).

Which norms get implemented and which do not deserves further attention. Political salience is a key concept in this, referring to the perceived importance and visibility of a topic among policy makers and the general public. More specifically, technical level recommendations from the EU and DAC have low political salience and implementing them may be seen by member states as bearing relatively low cost. As shown by Bressanelli et al. (2020), some issues in IDP are clearly low-salience, which can be highly advantageous for the narrow special interests involved, enabling them to shift conflicts into secluded decision-making spaces, minimize public visibility, and legitimize outcomes as responsible, expertise-based optimization. Technical changes can be implemented 'in-house' within an aid agency and are therefore less publicized and less likely to have an impact on the public's views of the government. These technical level reforms can be implemented by lower-level decision makers, who, due to their sustained interactions with the EU, the DAC and other norm entrepreneurs and resulting social learning, may be more likely to have ingrained beliefs about the 'appropriateness' of the norms. Reforms which would fundamentally change IDP will have relatively higher salience however, and therefore be more costly and more difficult to implement. These reforms may require the publication of a new strategy, or even new legislation by Parliament. As such they would attract the attention of higher-level politicians and may be less likely to resonate with their beliefs and ideologies. They may also generate press coverage and broader public interest. This can lead to the rejection of the norms; or, if there is significant international pressure, creative compliance.



This distinction between technical reforms and more fundamental/political ones means that international socialization may happen on one level, but not on the other, or may happen in tokenistic, creatively compliant ways. This possibility has received relatively little attention in the IDP literature, but a deeper understanding of it would significantly enhance knowledge on the drivers of reform in the policy area.

Methodology

To better understand the different levels of international socialization in development cooperation, we use Hungary as a case study. As discussed, Hungary was a least likely case for socialization under Orbán's governments. These governments have been resistant and hostile towards the EU, often enacting legislations that explicitly went against the rules of the bloc, in areas such as the regulation of the media, the rule of law, or civil society (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018). More broadly, the government had contested many of the norms underpinning Western societies, including liberal democracy and certain human rights, not to mention more progressive values around gender and LGBTQ rights. This least likely design means that if socialization happened in Hungary's IDP under Orbán, then it may happen in other donors too.

Our analysis of Hungary is based on two sets of qualitative data. First, we use documents related to Hungary's IDP. These include the DAC's first peer review of Hungary (OECD, 2023), the Hungarian government's self-assessment document for this peer review, other independent assessments, government websites, and various legislative texts. Second, to complement this data, we used relevant information from eight earlier interviews conducted with government officials between 2020 and 2023 (Paragi & Szent-Iványi 2024). We also carried out four new semi-structured interviews with officials and civil society stakeholders in 2024, focusing on the background of the reforms in IDP. The interviews were not recorded, but the notes taken during them were shared with respondents to prevent misunderstandings. A list of interviews is provided at the end of the paper. Interviewees remain anonymous to ensure confidentiality, and given the relatively small numbers of staff working in Hungarian IDP, we only provided limited details on their affiliations and roles, to avoid them becoming identifiable. During the analysis of the documents and the interview notes, we grouped our data into themes around specific instances of reform in development policy and practice. For each of these themes, we then established how they relate to EU and DAC recommendations, and finally linked them to data on motivations.

An 'Illiberal' Development Policy?

Hungary's IDP works in the context of the country's broader foreign policy, the goals of which have changed considerably between 2010 and 2026. After their 2010 landslide election victory, Orbán's Fidesz party initially pursued a Euro-Atlanticist foreign policy focused on the promotion of Hungarian strategic goals within Central Europe (including the protection of the rights of ethnic Hungarians outside of Hun-



gary), and a 'global opening': the re-establishment of relationships with emerging economies outside of Europe, with a strong focus on the 'East' (Tarrósy & Vörös, 2014; Song & Li, 2024). After Fidesz's 2014 election victory, a new 'pragmatic' foreign policy emerged, which moved trade interests with non-EU countries into focus, essentially subordinating foreign affairs to trade (Varga & Buzogány, 2021). At the same time, many experienced diplomats with Euro-Atlanticist leanings were replaced by young and sometimes less experienced recruits. Loyalty and a willingness to defend 'national interests' became the main expectations (Müller & Gazsi, 2023: 404–408).

Hungary became a donor of foreign aid in the run-up to EU accession in 2004 (Paragi, 2010) and joined the DAC in 2016. IDP received relatively little political attention until the mid-2010s, remaining underfunded and marginal within the country's foreign policy toolkit (Paragi & Szent-Iványi, 2024). However, the policy gained in importance under Orbán's governments: ODA spending increased from $111 million in 2010, peaking at $435 million in 2021, making Hungary the largest bilateral donor among the CEE EU member states. IDP was harnessed to support the country's increasingly global diplomatic and economic policy efforts, but also included a substantial scholarship programme focused on students from the Global South and East (Stipendium Hungaricum), Christian students mostly from the Global South, and young people from Hungarian diasporas.

There were at least five elements of Hungary's IDP which set the country apart from most of its DAC and EU peers. First, there was a strong outright emphasis on economic (and other) benefits for Hungary and Hungarian actors. Many donors of course have similarly 'selfish' goals with IDP, but almost none frame these as overtly as Hungary did. Creating export opportunities was one of the five pillars of Hungary's 2020–2025 International Development Strategy (Government of Hungary, 2019). Calls for project proposals by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) targeted Hungarian companies, who were required to show how their projects would benefit the Hungarian economy (Interview#3). Calls were often only published in Hungarian, creating language barriers (OECD, 2023: 45; Interview#7). Second, a significant share of Hungary's ODA targeted ethnic Hungarian minorities in Serbia and Ukraine. Hungary had provided support to these and other diaspora communities since the early 1990 s, but when it came to IDP, this approach discriminated among recipients based on their ethnicity, and was not viewed favourably by the OECD (2023: 32). Government officials argued that support for ethnic Hungarian communities should not be viewed as IDP, rather as tools of diaspora policy (Interview#4), but the government nonetheless included the spending in its ODA statistics. Third, Hungary spent increasingly large amounts after 2017 to support persecuted Christians communities in the Global South, under a programme called Hungary Helps, with the aim of ensuring that recipients remained in their homelands. In practice, this meant direct funding to local Christian churches and Hungarian faith-based organizations, mostly to (re)build religious and social infrastructure. This was seen by critics to represent a discrimination of recipients based on their faith, although government officials shared scholarly claims that Christian aid organizations usually offer services, without expectations regarding conversion, to non-Christians who were in need (Interview#1a; Interview#4; Interview#6). Furthermore, Hungary saw

supporting both ethnic Hungarian communities and Christian beneficiaries in ODA-eligible countries as intrinsically valuable (Interview#1a; Interview#2a). While the OECD (2023: 35) has been surprisingly positive about the funding of churches, many observers remained critical (Walker, 2019). Fourth, Hungary's IDP did not focus on poverty reduction. Only very limited amounts of assistance were channelled to least developed countries, and European recipients dominated (OECD 2023: 20). While the country did pay some lip service to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), little effort was made to map Hungary's practice on to specific goals (Government of Hungary, 2019). Finally, the policy reflected the government's admittedly conservative and anti-progressive ideology, and Orbán's particular brand of nationalism and identity politics. Hungarian funding for gender-related projects was significantly lower than the DAC average (OECD, 2024), and there was practically no funding for projects which would promote gender equality and the empowerment of women. Hungary's gender-related funding rather focused on the protection of vulnerable mothers (Hungary Helps, 2024a); Hungary had also blocked various EU initiatives arguing that these reflected 'gender ideology', such as the EU's Third Gender Action Plan (OECD, 2023: 48) or the Samoa Agreement between the EU and the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries (Fox, 2023).

Beyond these five major characteristics, there were further, smaller issues on which Hungary's IDP practice diverged from international recommendations. Hungary fragmented its assistance among a very high number of recipients (113 in 2022), leading to tiny individual projects (OECD, 2023: 22). The policy seemed highly ad hoc: even though there was an overarching strategy (Government of Hungary, 2019), its operationalization was unclear: there were no publicly available country strategies, and most funding-related decisions were made by individual government decisions (OECD, 2023: 19). Multiannual funding was practically impossible due to Hungary's budget law (Interview#8), leading to a lack of predictability. No impact evaluations of the policy or individual programmes or projects have ever been published. There was little transparency on how project implementers were selected (OECD, 2023: 29). Much of bilateral aid (45% in 2020; OECD, 2023: 37) was composed of scholarships, a form of tied aid that does not actually leave the country, and served to fund Hungarian universities and alleviate domestic labour shortages.

These practices paint a picture of an IDP closely aligned with government interests and ideology. The main goal was to ensure that Hungary derived (economic) benefits from IDP, and to signpost a conservative world view. This left little room for compliance with any external recommendations on making IDP more effective at reducing global poverty. Yet, in a way, Hungarian IDP was 'externally constrained' (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018: 1178), as Hungary, at least seemingly, needed to meet the obligations of international institutions in the policy area. We now turn to analysing the reforms which happened in Hungary's IDP after 2020, and discussing the role these obligations played in them.



Reforms in Hungarian IDP After 2020

Despite the 'hostile environment' for international socialization outlined above, there have been visible reforms to Hungary's IDP in the early 2020s. Many of these signified a convergence towards EU and DAC recommendations. Albeit most of these reforms were technical level changes, none were particularly ambitious, and some were only partial, they need to be seen in the broader context outlined above.

The most important reform, which is certainly not a technical level change, is a new law regulating the Hungary Helps Programme. This programme, which was originally set up to provide support for persecuted Christian communities in the Global South, was gradually transformed into a brand to cover all of Hungary's bilateral ODA. The Act on the Hungary Helps Program (Act 89/2023), adopted by Parliament in 2023, merged two previous laws regulating international humanitarian and development activities with the aim of bringing greater transparency and consistency to the policy area (Hungary Helps Agency, 2024b). According to the government, the purpose of the new Act was to:

> coordinate Hungary's policy instruments that can contribute to the protection of human lives, mitigate crises and help communities in crisis areas to stay in place. The measure aims to ensure a more systematic and effective intervention in humanitarian disasters and crises, and to improve the process, transparency and coordination of assistance. With the new legislation, Hungary aims to strengthen its position in the field of international assistance, while stressing the primary importance of protecting human lives and solidarity. (Hungary Helps Agency, 2024c)

The Act clarified the competences of the Hungary Helps Agency (HHA), the government agency charged with implementing the Hungary Helps Programme, and the division of labour between it and the MFAT (Interview#5b). It expanded the HHA's mandate so that it could manage development projects which previously fell under the auspices of the MFAT. The Act also enabled the HHA to issue calls for proposals and evaluate projects in cooperation with the MFAT, as well as receive and disburse funding. As a consequence, accountability became much stricter. The MFAT could exercise stricter control over the HHA, but the new legal framework also imposed more rigorous financial conditions that affected contractual relationships with beneficiaries and project implementers. While this created greater transparency and reduces financial risk, it also reduced flexibility (Interview#5b), a feature which had been appreciated by beneficiaries (Interview#6).

The Act also used more consistent vocabulary than previously. It provided definitions of terms used both in the legal text and the operational environment. By defining the meaning of these basic terms, the Act allowed the HHA to use consistent terminology while administering ODA projects and communication related to them, increasing clarity and transparency. Furthermore, the new Act applied a more cautious language regarding persecuted Christians: although the term 'persecuted' appeared eight times in the text, it emphasized that assistance may be used to support 'other religious minorities' as well (Interview#5b).



A goal of the Act was therefore to demonstrate the increased professionalism and transparency of Hungary's IDP. This was reflected in further reforms, including the redesign of the Hungary Helps Program's website and the launch of a new website featuring an International Development Cooperation Mapping Tool, which displayed the projects funded by Hungary (IDCMAP, 2024). The tool mapped Hungarian funding to each partner country for the years 2018 to 2020, and also listed individual projects, albeit with only very basic information. Furthermore, it was unclear whether the dataset included everything (indeed, the DAC has pointed out that there seem to be too many classified files; OECD, 2023: 27). The mapping tool did not include data after 2020, with some questioning (Interview#8) whether it would ever be updated at all. Nonetheless, the tool still represented a change compared to previous practice, where project level information was difficult to obtain. More broadly, there have also been efforts to improve overall data management practices: the MFAT developed detailed guidance for other line ministries on how to report their annual development activities (Interview#5b; Interview#8). This was intended to improve the quality of Hungary's data reporting to the DAC (MFAT, 2022a: 13). These transparency enhancing initiatives were seen to positively impact data-driven decision-making and accountability (MFAT, 2022a: 13).

The transparency of the tendering processes were also improved both at the HHA and the MFAT. The HHA created a separate page on its new website dedicated to applications, while in 2020, the MFAT compiled a 'Handbook on the Framework for the Selection, Monitoring and Evaluation of International Development Projects. This Handbook.

> sets out the fundamental principles for approaching each of the […] project cycle components […]. These guidelines not only serve the purpose of implementing the most relevant programs in the most effective manner possible, but they also aim to enhance the measurement, comparison and communication of results and the incorporation of lessons learnt and best practices into further programming. (MFAT, 2022a: 25)

The Handbook made the project selection and tendering processes more transparent, stressing that 'the implementers are chosen through openly published tenders with transparently stated criteria and a detailed evaluation framework, ensuring that the candidate with the best fit-for-purpose and price-value proposition is awarded the specific project' (MFAT, 2022a: 26).

The Handbook was also relevant for improving monitoring and evaluation, a practice that had long been missing in Hungarian IDP. The Handbook applied to all projects under the auspices of the MFAT, stressing the need to seek feedback from local partners and beneficiaries (OECD, 2023: 41). The DAC emphasized however that the results-based approach only seemed to focus on the delivery of outputs, and not on outcomes and impacts, and so did not represent a shift towards a true culture of evaluation. Furthermore, it was unclear whether the Handbook was actually followed in practice. Nonetheless, as there was no guidance at all on evaluation previously, the Handbook was a positive step.



There has been some movement towards providing more ODA to poorer countries outside of Europe. The government's International Development Strategy for 2020–2025 (Government of Hungary, 2019) stated a desire to engage more substantively with Sub-Saharan African and least developed countries. There was noticeable growth in the share of bilateral ODA allocated to Sub-Saharan Africa, up from 4% in 2014–2016 to 12% in 2020–2021 (Szent-Iványi & Lightfoot, 2024: 8). Furthermore, Hungary also launched a three-year multisector 'flagship' development program with Uganda in 2019 (MFAT, 2022b), 'tailored to fully conform to local needs' (MFAT, 2022a: 20). This may have potentially signified a shift away from one-off ad hoc projects towards more strategic planning, even though the programme ended in 2022. Chad can be mentioned as a similar initiative, although the broader public was somewhat puzzled over the objectives of opening an embassy and a 'humanitarian development centre' in 2024 in a remote country with which Hungary had little previous relations (Le Monde, 2024).

Hungary also made improvements in terms of coordination between government actors involved in IDP. International development coordinators were appointed in all line ministries, aimed to 'promote mutually reinforcing policy actions and synergies when planning international development projects or humanitarian aid' (MFAT, 2022a: 40).

To emphasize, these reforms need to be compared to the situation that prevailed previously and the broader context. The Fidesz government generally preferred opacity in its practices, especially around public procurement (Fazekas & Tóth, 2016), therefore the efforts towards greater transparency are especially noteworthy. The difficulties in accessing data and opaque tendering practices have long plagued Hungary's IDP (HAND, 2024). The new Act provided more transparent and robust requirements on financial management. The experiment with a long-term country programme in Uganda familiarized officials with a more strategic approach to development, as opposed to the previous system of small ad hoc projects. While European countries still dominated among recipients, the share of African partners increased. Numerous problems remained however: there were still no possibilities for multi-year funding or improved predictability, some of the reforms did not appear to be sustained (for example, the mapping tool), and there was still no outcome and impact-oriented evaluation culture that would have allowed institutional learning.

Explaining the Reforms

This section discusses the potential drivers behind these reforms. Using the framework around international socialization and Europeanization, we provide three possible competing, but also complementary explanations and empirical evidence for these. Each of these explanations is based on a theoretical mechanism discussed above: cost-benefit analysis, social learning and creative compliance.

First, the reforms may have been driven by cost-benefit analysis. In this sense, the convergence towards EU rules was motivated by the need to gain 'pillar assessed' status for the HHA (Interview#4), which would have allowed it to take part in the disbursement of funding from the EU's Global Europe budgetary instrument under



the indirect management modality. Indeed, there is ample evidence that the Act on the Hungary Helps Programme was driven by the need to align with EU rules on financial management (Interview#4; Interview#9). Alignment with these became necessary because the HHA could not access and manage EU funds without being subjected to a pillar assessment (Interview#4; Interview#5b). Conceptualized as measure for soft power (Juška, 2024) or as a 'disciplinary' tool (Kuldova, 2022), the EU's pillar assessment ensures, in line with Article 154 of the Financial Regulation, that external actors (such as member state aid agencies or international organizations) entrusted with the implementation of EU funds or budgetary guarantees, manage such funds in line with the EU's financial interests. Pillar assessment includes criteria along nine dimensions: '1) the internal control system; 2) the accounting system; 3) an independent external audit; as well as rules and procedures for: 4) providing financing from EU funds through grants; 5) procurement; 6) financial instruments; and also: 7) exclusion from access to funding; 8) publication of information on recipients; 9) protection of personal data.' (European Commission, 2019).

The need to gain pillar assessment was reflected in the wording and substance of the Act (Interview#5b; Interview#8). Becoming a pillar assessed organization was seen to bring benefits for the HAA because it would have allowed Hungary greater control over how EU development funds were allocated, potentially leading to greater success for Hungarian entities. This was further supported by the following statement in Hungary's self-assessment for the DAC peer review:

> Hungary's primary objective is to promote effective domestic participation in EU development tenders, including through the presentation and promotion of the pillar assessment process, which is essential for meeting the Commission's requirements for indirect management and becoming implementing partners. (MFAT, 2022a: 16)

Or, regarding the MFAT's project handbook:

> the Handbook outlines a rigorous process aiming to increase the effectiveness of the assistance provided and to assure ethical practices by putting in place a comprehensive set of anti-corruption measures, complying with the relevant domestic and *EU legislations*. (MFAT, 2022a: 25–26, emphasis added)

The Hungarian government therefore saw potential financial benefits from gaining pillar assessed status, and revised the regulation of its aid implementation processes to ensure greater transparency and accountability, aligning with EU requirements. How much the Act actually influenced practice remains unclear. However, there is evidence from the interviews that the HAA's previously rather ad hoc and opaque decision-making and lax financial monitoring were tightened, and more transparent bidding processes were promised (Interview#7). Civil society stakeholders agreed that these changes were a result of EU pressure (Interview#7).

The second explanation argues that the various technical level changes represent social learning and culture change among IDP staff, through their continuous involvement in EU decision making structures (especially the Council's relevant working



parties such as the Working Party on Development Cooperation and International Partnerships), or those of the DAC. Through these interactions, many officials were exposed to good practices in IDP, and some may have internalized these. On issues with low salience, these 'socialized' officials could then implement reforms without much political oversight.

There is only limited indirect evidence from our interviews with government officials and civil society stakeholders whether such culture change actually happened. The vocabulary used by the government officials we spoke with (Interviews#4, #5a, #5b, #8) as well as the challenges they faced in their daily work and the responses they provided to these were all aligned with those of the EU and the DAC. For example, some officials argued for the importance of the SDGs, and berated the government for not doing more to communicate this towards the public (Interview#4). Another interviewee noted that those who originally initiated the idea of the Hungary Helps Programme (then focused on supporting persecuted Christian communities in the Middle East) and 'sold' it to Orbán in 2016 were less knowledgeable about Hungary's commitments in the context of international development and humanitarianism (Interview#9); the programme therefore later needed to be 'aligned' with these commitments. Civil society stakeholders also felt that many government officials sincerely believed that development policy was a force for good, and lamented that even though the government had increased the amount of ODA, the policy still did not have the same priority as trade or investment promotion (Interview#7). In some instances, high-level politicians 'improvised' in their speeches in a manner which was not aligned with briefings prepared for them by aid officials (Interview#4). This implies that politicians and officials had different perceptions about IDP, hinting potentially at different values on the political and technical levels.

The interview data however do not provide any direct evidence of social learning processes for officials through their exposure to international organizations. While officials used the language of the EU and the DAC, there were numerous instances in the interviews when they defended Hungary's IDP, or argued for its unique value added. Social learning has also been made difficult by the frequent rotation of staff in the MFAT, although personnel were seen to be more stable in the HHA (Interview#7; Interview#8). This created a constant lack of experience and knowledge in the MFAT, especially on the strategic level (Interview#7; HAND, 2024). It is therefore difficult to identify any 'smoking gun' evidence of social learning, which corresponds to previous findings in the literature on shallow Europeanization (Orbie & Lightfoot, 2017).

The third explanation is based on the concept of creative compliance: Hungary's reforms can be seen as driven by the need to placate international actors with relatively superficial changes, without really challenging the nature of the country's 'illiberal' IDP. An interviewee stated this rather clearly:

> The possibilities offered by international organizations are important and Hungary should benefit from these. To achieve this, it must implement technical, methodological and financial solutions without compromising Hungary's values. (Interview#5b)



This understanding was borne out by others as well, who mentioned that 'compliance' with the EU and DAC norms is mainly driven by the need to access funding (Interview#4). The technical solutions to ensure this compliance are generally ones with low political costs, but can be weaved into a narrative which external stakeholders may perceive as significant reform effort. This is evident in the self-assessment document, which mentions how Hungary aligns with various OECD guidelines on nine occasions, and those of the EU on seven. For example, it states that the Handbook 'heavily [relies] on the guidelines set by the OECD' (MFAT, 2022a: 29), or that 'in line with the DAC guidelines, the [MFAT] has developed detailed instructions for domestic data providers' (MFAT, 2022a: 13).

The fact that the MFAT's IDP webpages and the project mapping tool were not updated after 2022, and indeed no longer available as of September 2025 hint that they were important for the DAC peer review, but were quietly dropped afterwards. An interviewee confirmed that funding for the mapping tool has been cut, and there would be no regular newsletter either (Interview#8).

A careful reading of the 2023 Act further reveals that Hungary did not fundamentally shift its values, despite emphasizing financial transparency. The normative framing of the Act missed key elements: there were no explicit references to human rights, other than the right to religious freedom. There were no references to obligations stemming from DAC membership, and the law blurred the boundary between export-tied loans and other forms of concessional funding (Interview#9). Civil society groups argued that they were not consulted during the drafting of the law; and that opportunities for more general formal dialogue were rare (Interview#7; HAND, 2024). This reflected the government's broader hostility towards politically engaged members of civil society. While the government adapted some technical reforms due to external pressure, some of which were later abandoned, the ideology around supporting Christian communities and economic gains for Hungarian actors remained strongly present. Low cost, technical reforms, without changing the broader orientation of the system indicated a situation of creative compliance.

These three explanations complement each other. Hungary undertook more political reforms only where financial gains outweighed costs. On other issues however, reforms remained on the technical level. Social learning was weak at best, although there is evidence of officials internalizing at least some international norms. All reforms show evidence of creative compliance: the ideology behind Hungary's IDP remained unchanged, and some of the technical reforms were not sustained after the DAC had conducted its peer review.

Conclusions

This paper aimed to explain how international socialization and Europeanization impact international development policies, focusing on situations of technical socialization, where countries adopt some relatively technical norms, but not more political ones. Using Hungary as a least likely case study, it showed that some socialization is possible in environments that are relatively hostile to adopting international norms. However, Hungary's reforms seem to have been driven by cost-benefit analysis and



showed signs of creative compliance. While some officials may have internalized international norms due to their interactions with peers in the EU and the DAC, this did not happen in case of higher-level policy makers.

These results show that socialization in IDP can happen in hostile environments, but only if the benefits of rule adoption outweigh the costs, and even then socialization will be partial and compliance with the rules creative. These findings bring more depth to the literature on Europeanization in IDP, enriching our understanding of what exactly 'shallow' Europeanization entails. For the purposes of this special issue, they shine a light on how new-ish aid donors on Europe's semiperiphery instrumentally adopt some norms of mainstream IDP, without compromising on their own ideologies. While Hungary's case is clearly not generalizable to all CEE countries, we do see strong political resistance against deeper socialization into the norms of mainstream IDP, which implies that treating these countries as established donors is not fully warranted. It must also be noted that these findings relate to IDP under Viktor Orbán's governments. It is yet unclear how the government of Péter Magyar, Orbán's successor, will shape IDP.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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Interviews

Interview#1a: two officials, Prime Minister's Office, Budapest, 12/03/2020.
Interview#1b: official (one of the participants from 1a), Prime Minister's Office, phone, 26/11/2020.
Interview#2a: former diplomat, MFAT, phone, 30/11/2020.
Interview#2b: former diplomat, MFAT (same as 2a), Budapest, 11/04/2023.
Interview#3: official, MFAT, Budapest, 11/11/2020.
Interview#4: three officials, MFAT, Budapest, 29/03/2023.
Interview#5a: official, Hungary Helps Agency, online, 04/05/2023.
Interview#5b: official (same as 5a), Hungary Helps Agency, Budapest, 14/08/2024
Interview#6: Hungarian FBO representative, online, 18/05/2023.
Interview#7: two Hungarian civil society representatives, Budapest, 10/06/2024.
Interview#8: official, MFAT, Budapest, 18/06/2024.
Interview#9: former diplomat, MFAT, phone, 27/08/2024.

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