



ORIGINAL PAPER

Human Rights in Central and Eastern European Countries: Towards Their Accession to the European Union

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Abstract

Until the Maastricht Treaty (1992/1993) the European integration was of mostly economic nature. Maastricht Treaty extended the competences of the European Communities by including new policy areas and opened the way to political integration. Parallel with the deepening of the European integration process, with the end of the Cold war, the former communist states started the process of transformation and democratization of their national systems and proclaimed their aspirations of joining the EU. The integration of the new democracies into the European family was a historic moment and opportunity for the Union to overcome the East-West division and to promote peace and stability throughout Europe. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the understanding of the role and significance of the EU for the newly established democracies and the way it encourages important political and economic reforms in the countries engaged in the enlargement agenda. EU started to prepare itself for the forthcoming enlargement process and set out new conditions for membership- the Copenhagen criteria. The aim of this paper is to analyze the respect of human rights as one of the main prerequisites for EU membership in the case with Central and Eastern European countries accession to the EU. The paper furthermore explores human rights protection in the EU, the role of the ECJ in introducing human rights into EU proceedings, as well as the external dimension of EU human rights policy.

Keywords: *European Union; enlargement; Copenhagen criteria; human rights.*

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Introduction

The European integration process started in the 1950s with the creation of the three communities: the European Coal and Steel Community (established with the Treaty of Paris signed in 1951, came into force in 1952), the European Economic Community (established with the Treaty of Rome signed in 1957, entered into force in 1958) and the European Atomic Energy Community (established with the Treaty of Rome signed in 1957, entered into force in 1958) with an aim to provide peace, security and prosperity on the European continent that was devastated by the World war II. Founders of these communities were six western European states. The politics of the Cold war shaped the process of European integration that continued to develop as western integration and reflects the division of the two blocks (East and West) that had different economic and political systems and ideologies.

European communities, as well as the Council of Europe, the Organization for European Economic Cooperation (OEED, later transformed into the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development- OECD), the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO alliance), the Warsaw Treaty Organization (WTO) and the Western European Union (WEU) had institutionalized the division of Europe into opposing militarized blocks, with clear boundaries and entry rules. The relations between these sub-regional structures and their member states reflected the antagonisms between the main protagonists- the USSR and the USA (Mannin, 1999: 5).

At the Lisbon European Council 1992, the Commission presented a paper- "Europe and the challenge of enlargement" that examines the issues associated with accession to the Union (in that period consisting of 12 member states) of the countries that have applied for membership or the countries that had announced their intention to apply following the end of the Cold war division. In the past, the enlargement of the Community took place in a divided continent; the integration of the new democracies into the European family was a historic moment and opportunity for the Union to contribute to the unification of the whole continent. In this report, the Union expressed its commitment to be engaged in economic preparation of these countries for future accession, because their development is of capital importance for their peoples and the stability of the European continent.

The Copenhagen criteria for membership (defined at the European Council in Copenhagen in 1993) are conditions that candidate countries must fulfill in order to become a member states. These are: political criteria (membership requires that the candidate country has achieved stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities), economic criteria (the existence of a functioning market economy and capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union) and acceptance of the Community acquis (candidate's ability to take on the obligations of membership, including adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union (European Council in Copenhagen, Conclusions of the Presidency, 21-22 June 1993; Wallace, 2004).

European Union and human rights

Because at the beginning the European Communities had an essentially economic character, there were no explicit provisions for human rights protection in the treaties establishing the European Communities (with minor exceptions) and the individual was mainly treated in the relation of that economic integration (as an

economic actor at the market). Such reference was made for the first time in the Preamble of the Single European act (1986/87).

The Treaty of Maastricht contains more comprehensive provisions on human rights (as well as the consequent treaties). Article 6(3) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) recognizes fundamental rights as general principles of the Union's law, as guaranteed by the European convention and as they result from constitutional traditions common to member states. Prior to the Maastricht Treaty, human rights protection was developed by the European Court of Justice (ECJ). The ECJ fulfilled the legal gap on human rights protection by the general principles of the Community law. The provisions contained in the Maastricht Treaty and the following treaties are built on the several decades of work of the ECJ regarding the affirmation of the general principles on fundamental rights (Georgievski, 2010: 199-202). General principles of the Union law are not prescribed by the founding treaties or adopted by the EU institutions, but are mainly developed through the jurisprudence of the ECJ. Because of the mainly economic character of the integration until the 1990s, the ECJ led the way in introducing human rights into EU proceedings. Case law of the ECJ implies that human rights values must be respected not only by EU institutions, but also by the member states. This situation is explained by the widespread support for civil and political rights in the traditional liberal democracies of Western Europe, so that particularly regional courts but also other regional bodies can advance effective judicial activism and creativity in interpreting the law (Forsythe, 2000: 123).

The EU has adopted the Charter of fundamental rights in 2000 as a non-binding document. The proclamation of the Charter is turning point in the human rights protection- the catalogue of fundamental rights that provides visibility and publicity of the guaranteed rights and leads to a higher degree of legal certainty (Kuhling, 2006: 504). It was the Treaty of Lisbon (2007/2009) that gave legally binding force of this Charter. The Charter is composed of Preamble and seven chapters (dignity, freedoms, equality, solidarity, citizen's rights, justice, general provisions).

European Union and international human rights law

Under the Lisbon Treaty the EU has legal personality, which makes the EU subject of international law, with capacity to conclude international agreements on its own behalf. The capacity includes the competence to join human rights conventions. Under article 216(1) of the Treaty on the functioning of the European Union (TFEU), the EU has the external competence to conclude international agreements where Treaties or a legally binding EU act provide so, or where agreement is necessary to achieve the objectives referred to by the Treaties, or is likely to affect common rules or alter their scope. According to article 216(2) of the TFEU, agreements concluded by the EU are binding on its institutions and its member states (Nousiainen, K. and Chinkin, C, 2016: 55). The EU is currently party to the United Nations Convention on the rights of persons with disability (CRPD, 2006/2008). The CRPD is the first of the core international human rights treaties that explicitly allows for accession by regional organizations, an option that EU made use of by becoming party to the CRPD. The CRPD entered into force for the EU as a whole in January 2011. The CRPD illustrates the increasing interconnection between the national, EU and international human rights levels (European Agency for fundamental rights, 2011: 248).

Each of the EU member states are parties of the European convention on human rights and fundamental freedoms (1950/1953) of the Council of Europe. The Lisbon

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Treaty expressly mandates the EU to join the European Convention on Human Rights (which itself has been amended to allow this). This means that the EU, as is already the case for its member states, will become subject, as regards respect for fundamental rights, to review by a legal body external to itself, namely the European Court of human rights (ECtHR). Following accession, EU citizens and third country nationals present on EU territory will be able to challenge legal acts adopted by the EU directly before the ECtHR on the basis of the provisions of ECHR, in the same way as they may challenge legal acts adopted by EU member states (European Parliament, 2019:2). TFEU in its article 351 preserve for member states those obligations arising from agreements concluded before acceding to the EU. Similar view has adopted the European Court on human rights in its 2005 judgment in the case of *Capital bank AD v. Bulgaria* (application No. 49429/99), where the Court stated that the ECHR need to be interpreted in such a manner as to allow state parties to comply with their international obligations, as long as the measures in issue are compatible with the Convention and its Protocols (para. 111).

Most frequently, the ECJ has drawn on the provisions of the ECHR, though provisions of other treaties are not excluded. However, the EU is not bound to comply with the letter of the ECHR or case law of the European Court of Human Rights. The acceptance of any right as part of the 'general principles' of Community law is taken on a case-by-case basis. The ECJ does refer to other international human rights instruments when considering the content of fundamental rights in EU law. Perhaps the most significant such treaty (from the point of view of its global reach and scope of rights) is the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Although the ECJ acknowledges the existence of the ICCPR, it is difficult to find an example where it has actually relied on its provisions. (Ahmed and Butler, 2006: 774).

External dimension of human rights policy

In its relations with the wider world, EU contributes to the protection of human rights, in particular the rights of the child, as well as to the strict observance and the development of international law, including respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter (article 3(5) of the TEU) and calls for the EU institutions and bodies and its member states to respect the Charter in EU's external relations. With regard to external action, the Treaty states that it is one of the main objectives of the common foreign and security policy to develop and consolidate democracy and the rule of law, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Community development cooperation policy is centered on human beings and their needs; it is closely linked to the enjoyment of fundamental rights and freedoms and the recognition and application of democratic principles, the consolidation of the rule of law and good governance (Commission of the European Communities, 1995: 5-12). The EU has taken action on a number of issues, such as political and economic support to the new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe (Hix, 1999: 355-356).

The EU aspired not only to protecting human rights within its jurisdiction but also in a "common foreign and security policy". EU resources are devoted to this objective and the EU is one of the major donors to international humanitarian assistance designed to secure rights to adequate food, clothing, shelter and health care in emergency situations. References to human rights are included in treaties with other countries. The EU has helped supervise elections in numerous countries (Forsythe, 2000: 123). EU institutions are involved in democracy support activities in order to strengthen

democratic institutions and participation of citizens in formulation of policies across the world. Election observation is a concrete and highly visible expression of the Union's support of human rights, democracy and the rule of law (European Union, 2018: 16). Trade policy can support the advancement of and respect for human rights in third countries in conjunction with other EU external policies, in particular development cooperation. Human rights considerations, including fundamental principles and rights at work, are integrated into bilateral and regional trade agreements. Globally, EU remains committed to integrating human rights (civil and political, as well as economic, social and cultural rights) into development cooperation. EU is promoting the advancement of all human rights through development cooperation using a rights-based approach. EU and its member states promote inclusion and participation, non-discrimination, equality and equity, transparency and accountability, and address multiple discrimination faced by vulnerable and marginalized groups (European Union, 2018: 84-89).

Conflict and crisis have affected the lives of millions of civilians. Serious violations of international humanitarian and human rights law are common in many armed conflicts. The EU's commitment to human rights includes integrating human rights considerations into all its policies and financing instruments addressing these issues. The EU refers to human rights and gender policies in the planning, implementation, conduct and evaluation of Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions and operations. Specialized training on human rights, gender, children and armed conflict, protection of civilians and conflict prevention is also available through ESDC and other Member State initiatives (European Union, 2016: 7).

Human rights and candidate states- the case with the Central and Eastern European countries

With the end of the Cold war the countries from the former Soviet bloc started the process of democratic transition and declared their aspirations for EU membership. It was for the first time in EU history so many countries to apply for membership at the same time. The EU helped the democratic transition in the post-communist countries and for this purpose introduced new strategies to assist CEEs that were adjusted to the specific needs and circumstances in each country.

The need to devise a policy towards the countries of Central and Eastern Europe shot on the EU's agenda in the late 1980s. It was prompted by dramatic political changes after the break-up of the Soviet Union. Devising an appropriate policy presented a major challenge for EU policy-makers, compared with the previously extremely limited relationship with the CEEs. The prospect of eastern enlargement had far-reaching implications for EU, regarding the need for internal reforms in order to accommodate the accession of CEEs (Sedelmeier & Wallace, 2000: 428). The special meeting of European Council in 1990 agreed to create a new type of association agreement as a part of the new pattern of relationships in Europe.

The newly independent countries of Central and Eastern Europe wanted to join EU for a range of economic, political and security reasons. They wanted to consolidate their fledgling democratic norms and institutions (Dinan, 2004: 9):

- Economic reasons for membership- ruined by forty years of communism, the Central and Eastern European countries struggled in the early 1990s to make the transition to capitalism (each of them chose slightly different path and progress at varying speed). However, with EU assistance and the prospects for EU membership (by

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which they would be integrated into a larger, lucrative European marketplace) were crucial for successful transition;

- Security implications of EU membership- as former Soviet satellites or, for some of them (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) former Soviet republics, they wanted to become part of the European security framework (although their primary security objective was to join NATO).

On the other hand, the EU strove to bring the Central and Eastern European countries up to a level of economic performance, political stability and administrative capacity necessary to endure the pressures of membership. The EU collectively and the member states separately, helped to bring along the Central and Eastern European countries through various programmes. Concerned about latent irredentism and weak underpinnings for minority rights in Central and Eastern Europe, the EU took one of its first Common foreign and security policy initiatives in the region- the so-called Stability pact (Dinan, 2004: 15).

The consequences of continual empowerment of the EU begun to be visible within domestic political systems, reflected in the changes of institutions, policies and politics. The process of domestic adaptation to the impact of the EU is called Europeanization. In the case of the post-communist member states the situation before acceding to EU was more specific. In post-communist countries transition to pluralist political systems and market economies was transformative in character as the aim of most of these countries was EU membership. Because of this, the transposition (downloading) of the *acquis communautaire* has more significant role in their transformation (prior to their accession) than for the older, established states in the West. In the post-communist countries much of the domestic change occurred before actual membership (this means that the Europeanization happened during the pre-accession period). These candidate states were, for the most part, only downloaders of the *acquis* without being in a position to influence or possibility to upload their preferences in a meaningful way. As a result of the strong desire of these countries for membership in the shortest possible time EU was allowed to have an unprecedented influence on the restructuring of domestic institutions and public policies in the Central and Eastern European countries (Ladrech, 2010: 38-39). Unlike the Europeanization agenda that was applied to older member states, entry into EU membership of the CEEs reflects a sort of official acknowledgment of success in their transformation.

The forthcoming enlargement of the EU was thoroughly prepared and based on clear principles, which have been articulated by successive European Councils, and on transparent and objective method set out by the Commission in Agenda 2000 and applied each year in its Progress reports (European Union, 2001: 6). The Commission's opinions on applicant states constitute a sound overall analysis of each applicant state's situation in the light of the membership criteria set out by the Copenhagen European Council. The prospects of membership represent an incentive for applicants to speed up implementation of policies which comply with the Union *acquis*. Incorporation of the *acquis* into legislation is necessary, but is not in itself sufficient- it will be necessary to ensure that it is actually applied (Presidency conclusions of the Luxembourg European Council 1997: para. 23). Accession of the CEEs countries depended on the extent to which each complies with the Copenhagen criteria. In assessing the application of Copenhagen criteria, for the Commission effective functioning of democracy was primordial in the assessment of readiness for membership. The Commission carefully examined the procedural democracy currently practiced and the efficacy of institutions

and processes in support of that practice. With regard of respect to human rights and minorities, while all countries have acceded to the European convention of human rights of the Council of Europe, concern was expressed in a number of cases regarding the independence of the media, the particular problems of non-citizens in Estonia and Latvia and concern over discrimination against the Roma in several countries (Mannin, 1999: 54).

When the application for accession is assessed, the Commission, on the basis of the Copenhagen criteria, reviews the country's current situation regarding the situation with human rights and minorities. The Commission, in each country opinion, went beyond formal descriptions of political institutions and the relations among them, to assess how democracy actually works in practice and how various rights and freedoms are exercised. Many of the applicant countries have minority populations, which satisfactory integration into society is a condition for democratic stability. The EU played an important role in supporting democracy and human rights respect in the CEEs countries. The Commission regularly assessed the progress achieved by the CEEs in meeting the requirements set by the Copenhagen political criteria.

Table 1. Meeting the political criteria for membership- the situation with respect of human rights and the rights of minorities

Country	Conclusions of the regular reports	European Commission opinions
Bulgaria	Some progress has been made on human rights training of police and on combating trafficking of human beings. However, there is a need to address police behavior, as regard reported cases of ill-treatment continues to give cause for serious concern. A Child protection agency has been set up (further steps need to be taken to make it operational). Roma continued to suffer from widespread social discrimination.	In its 1997 opinion, the Commission concluded that Bulgaria fulfilled the political criteria. Since that time, Bulgaria has made considerable progress in further consolidating and deepening stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities (Bitzenis, 2013: 307)
Estonia	The European Commission harshly criticized the country's language laws that are unfavorable to business relationships and tend to discriminate against minorities..."The adoption of the language law that restricts access of non-Europeans in political and economic life, constitutes a step forward and need to be amended"... The EU progress report on Estonia, published on 9 October 2002, was not free of criticism (e.g. mention was made of unemployment, public administration and naturalization). (source: Jeffris, 2004: 7-8)	In its 1997 Opinion, the Commission concluded that Estonia fulfills the Copenhagen political criteria. Since that time, Estonia has made considerable progress in further consolidating and deepening stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities.

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Hungary	<p>Progress can be reported with regard to asylum, where the situation considerably improved due to faster and better procedures and more appropriate reception facilities. However, there is a need to address police behavior with regard to reported cases of ill-treatment. In the area of public service media, a solution needs to be found regarding the composition of the Supervisory Boards of Trustees. New policy instruments and measures were adopted for Roma minority. It will be important to enhance efforts to fight against widespread discrimination and to fully implement and enforce the legislation already in place. The Roma minority should also be given the opportunity to participate more actively in public life.</p>	<p>In its 1997 Opinion, the Commission concluded that Hungary fulfilled the political criteria. Since that time, the country has made considerable progress in further consolidating and deepening stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities.</p>
Latvia	<p>Further important steps were taken to promote the integration of non-citizens into Latvian society, notably measures to facilitate the naturalization procedure and the adoption of a more elaborate Society integration program and the legal basis for the future Social integration foundation. Latvia has achieved progress towards meeting the short-term priorities of the Accession partnership in the areas of the Language law and language training. Some progress has been made towards meeting the medium-term priorities in the areas of further integration of non-citizens; however, these efforts need to continue.</p>	<p>In its 1997 Opinion, the Commission concluded that Latvia fulfilled the political criteria. Since that time, the country has made considerable progress in further consolidating and deepening stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities.</p>
Lithuania	<p>Has made progress towards meeting the accession priorities related to the political criteria. Ongoing efforts to increase the integration of Roma in Lithuanian society need to be sustained. The Children's rights Ombudsman established in 2000 has been particularly active. Cooperation and coordination among various institutions involved in refugee matters need to be improved. Trafficking of women continues to be a problem and greater efforts to prevent it are required.</p>	<p>In its 1997 Opinion, the Commission concluded that Lithuania fulfilled the political criteria. Since then, the country has made considerable progress in further consolidating and deepening stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities.</p>

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Poland	<p>There has been some progress in establishing the legal framework for equal opportunities and further work needs to be undertaken in this regard. A new element that has come to light has been the abuse of custody, which has been reported in certain cases that needs to be address. First steps have already been taken in this respect.</p>	<p>In its 1997 opinion, the Commission concluded that Poland fulfilled the political criteria. Since then, the country has made considerable progress in further consolidating and deepening the stability of its institutions guaranteeing democracy, rule of law, human rights and respect and protection of minorities.</p>
Czech Republic	<p>It has consolidated its internal institutional framework in the field of human rights. However, increased efforts are necessary to better fight the persistent trafficking of women and children. Considerable efforts have been made by the Czech government as regards Roma and other minorities. However, further efforts to combat widespread discrimination are needed, in line with the government policy for the Roma of 2000.</p>	<p>In its 1997 opinion, the Commission concluded that the Czech Republic fulfilled the political criteria. Since that time, the country has made considerable progress in further consolidating and deepening stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities.</p>
Romania	<p>Significant progress has been made in the field of human rights. Reform of the childcare system is well under way; homosexuality has been decriminalized; and important new legislation has been passed towards restitution of property and the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees. Introduction of probation constitutes and important reform of the penal system; several initiatives have been taken to address trafficking of human beings. Further reforms should increase the public accountability of police officers as well as ensure proportionality of their actions. Efforts to improve the actual living conditions in childcare institutions should continue. New legislation extending the use of minority languages was approved. A national strategy for improving condition of Roma was adopted (efforts need to focus on implementation of the strategy and effective combat of the widespread discrimination).</p>	<p>In its 1997 Opinion, the Commission concluded that Romania fulfilled the political criteria. Since then, the country has made considerable progress in further consolidating and deepening stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities.</p>

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Slovakia	The constitutional reform created the basis for strengthening of the institutional structure in the field of human rights. However, there is a need to address police behavior, notably with regard to reported cases of ill-treatment. Significant efforts in further developing and putting into practice approaches to protect minority rights were taken (by implementing relevant government strategies). Positive steps were achieved towards enhancing the use and protection of minority languages. As regards the Roma minority, implementation of the Roma strategy should be further enhanced and appropriate financial means should be made available.	In its 1999 regular report, the Commission concluded that Slovakia fulfilled the political criteria. Since that time, Slovakia has made considerable progress in further consolidating and deepening stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities.
Slovenia	Continues to fulfill Copenhagen political criteria. There is a need to address police behavior, notably with regard to reported cases of ill-treatment. Concerns have been expressed over increased police brutality in Slovenia and excessive use of force against people in custody.	In its 1997 Opinion, the Commission concluded that Slovenia fulfilled the political criteria. Since then, the country has made considerable progress in further consolidating and deepening stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities.

Source: European Union: Making a success of enlargement: Strategy Paper and Report of the European Commission on the progress towards accession by each of the candidate countries, Annex 1: Conclusions of the regular reports

Conclusion

EU has welcomed the aspirations of CEEs countries to join the EU. It was seen as possibility to overcome the Cold war division of the European continent and to spread the European values on which the EU was found throughout the whole continent.

The enlargement process has contributed to achieving political stability and economic growth. Enlargement with CEEs began in the early 1990s. The accession of new member states has benefited the EU- the enlargement has added to the EU's economic as well as physical size, and to the EU's share of global trade, allowing the EU to become a major international actor. Enlargement allowed the EU to fill the European space to which its founders advocated. This is especially true of Central and Eastern European enlargement. This enlargement phase allowed EU to overcome the East-West political debate and to promote peace and stability in Europe (Dinan, 2004: 13).

The EU had to prepare itself for the biggest possible enlargement with the accession of the CEEs states by its internal adjustment to the growing number of members and by setting more rigid conditions for EU membership- the Copenhagen criteria. On the other hand, the EU has helped the democratic transition of CEEs countries so they can endure the pressures of membership. In the case with the CEEs, the process of adjustment to EU *acquis* (Europeanization) happened before they actually become members. In the pre-accession period, the situation regarding with respect of human rights and minorities was carefully evaluated.

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Article Info

Received: April 09 2019

Accepted: April 17 2019
