

## **The New Engines of European Enlargement: Central Europe’s Role in Completing Europe**

**By Damon M. Wilson\***

### **Introduction**

In the wake of the collapse of the Berlin Wall, “Europe whole, free and secure” was not just a vision. It became a successful policy leading to the consolidation of democracy in Central Europe and, with the region’s integration into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU), the end of a divided continent.

This outcome was neither easy nor obvious. Turning the collapse of the communist system into a triumph of free market democracies in Central Europe required leadership both within the countries of the region and in the West. Central European leaders had to make tough decisions and enact painful reforms in order to transform their societies. At the same time, North American and West European leaders had to be courageous and visionary to invest in these reform processes and then to welcome these nations into Europe’s great institutions.

### **Today’s Challenge**

The same leadership demonstrated over the past 20 years is required over the next two decades to “complete Europe” — that is, to finish the unfinished business of integrating the Western Balkans and the continent’s Eastern approaches into the European mainstream, including ultimately into the EU and NATO. Achieving this feat requires the same bold leadership: the commitment of reformers to accelerate the transformation of their societies toward transatlantic norms; and the conviction among current NATO and EU members to support the vision of “completing Europe.”

Today, however, we are lacking the vision and the policy initiatives to extend this great success story to the South and to the East. The demise of the former paradigm of integration stems from several factors:

- The lack of political will among European nations preoccupied with domestic challenges

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ranging from unemployment to immigration; exacerbated by the economic and financial crisis; and fearful about further dilution of the increasingly cumbersome EU and NATO;

- The reality that the nations in question present more difficult cases of reform and transformation than Central Europe did; and
- A more authoritarian Russia voicing stronger opposition to further EU and NATO enlargement toward its borders.

### Central Europe's Responsibility

Despite these inauspicious circumstances, those who benefited most from the policies of the past 20 years, the nations of Central Europe, carry a particular responsibility in articulating the vision and developing the policy to ensure their neighbors enjoy the same opportunities in the future. To advance its own interests in integrating neighbors as peaceful free-market democracies, Central Europe must take the lead in reversing today's defeatism.

Unlike any time since 1989, Central Europe possesses the tools to advance an audacious agenda: back-to-back EU Presidencies (Hungary and Poland), chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (Lithuania) and a reinvigorated Visegrád Group.

Central Europe is no longer the object of a "Europe whole and free" policy, but rather has the potential to be its engine. Post-1989 Central Europe has come of age. As Vice President Joseph Biden said in Bucharest in October 2009:

*In Eastern Europe, countries still struggle to fulfill the promise of a strong democracy, or a vibrant market economy. [...] You [Central European countries] can help guide Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine along the path of lasting stability and prosperity. It's your time to lead. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus can benefit from your personal experiences. The EU Eastern Partnership Initiative is a good example of how you can energize the effort. And we will partner with you in working to fulfill the promise of 1989.*

Biden correctly called for the mantle of leadership to advance reforms in Europe's East to shift to the EU and Central Europe in particular, with strong support from the United States. However, the leaders of Central Europe know from experience that the best incentive for reform in the region is the prospect of gaining the political resilience, economic vibrancy and security resulting from membership in the EU and NATO — a prospect not currently on the table for most European nations outside these institutions.

While Central Europe undoubtedly has an important role to play in assisting reformers in the Western Balkans and Europe's East, that assistance would be far more effective if it were incentivized by the prospect of eventual membership. The region needs to clarify in Brussels and Washington that the lesson from its own experience is that the prospect for membership in NATO and the EU is the best engine for reforms.

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### **The Agenda**

Since the democratic revolutions in 1989, Europe and North America have taken significant steps to erase the dividing lines of the Cold War. All of the former Soviet bloc satellites, a reunified Germany, the Baltic States and Slovenia are now both NATO and EU members. But this rapid and dramatic success story risks being short lived. Central Europe can play a key role in generating momentum to finish the job in the Western Balkans, while accelerating the prospect for integration of Europe's Eastern approaches.

### *Integrating the Western Balkans*

There is a fairly strong consensus that the whole of the Western Balkans will eventually enter the EU and, if desired, NATO. Since 2002, European leaders have articulated this vision, yet its implementation has proven difficult; once Croatia completes accession negotiations this year, progress will stall. NATO's New Strategic Concept reaffirms the Alliance's Open Door policy and makes clear its aim to "facilitate the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans," signaling that these nations are at the head of the queue.

Slovenia led the way joining NATO and the EU in 2004. Croatia and Albania joined NATO in 2009. Central Europe can push to accelerate the next steps.

- Under Hungary's and Poland's EU Presidencies, and with Budapest's and Warsaw's prodding of Brussels and Zagreb, **Croatia** has the opportunity to complete its accession negotiations with the EU this year.
- **Montenegro** received a Membership Action Plan from NATO and official candidate status from the EU in 2010. It is an increasingly viable candidate for membership in both institutions. A strong push by Central Europe, coupled with an aggressive reform program and diplomatic strategy by Podgorica, could put Montenegro on the agenda for the next NATO summit (to be hosted by the United States in 2012) and provide a boost to its EU candidacy.
- In 2008, the Alliance agreed **Macedonia** was ready for membership pending resolution of the name issue, yet negotiations remain bogged down. Similarly, in 2001 Macedonia was the first Balkan country to sign a Stabilization and Association Agreement. However, its path to the EU has been circuitous — including having the EU Council postpone the granting of a start date for accession in large part because of the name issue. Central European leaders should initiate a concerted campaign to convince Macedonia's Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski to compromise, to prepare his population for this and to reach a deal with Greek Prime Minister Georgios Papandreou on the name issue, paving the way for Macedonia's entry into NATO at the 2012 summit, as well as action on Skopje's official EU candidacy.
- **Albania**, a member of NATO since 2009, has applied for membership in the EU, but recent domestic political turmoil has exacerbated EU concerns about its readiness for membership. Central European leaders could play a role in mentoring Prime Minister Sali Berisha and opposition leaders on how to engage in constructive politics.

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- The integration of **Serbia**, the source of recent conflict in the region, is the strategic key to long-term stability in the Balkans. Serbia has applied for EU membership, but given its military confrontation with NATO over Kosovo, it is likely to pursue a much slower course toward the Alliance. Central Europe can play a leading role in supporting Belgrade's reforms and exposing the Serbian people to life as Europeans. The region can also help create a constituency in the country, which would press for implementation of reforms and shape the public opinion necessary to sustain European integration. Serbia's neighbors can also play a leading role in normalizing the popular perception of NATO.
- In April 2010, NATO Allies invited **Bosnia and Herzegovina** to join the Membership Action Plan, contingent upon agreement on immovable defense property. Bosnia and Herzegovina is also preparing an application for EU membership. Given the extraordinary challenges remaining and the obstacles to European integration stemming from nationalist politicians, Central Europe's contribution should be to force the EU to keep its diplomacy in the country at the top of the EU political agenda and to encourage Washington to remain heavily engaged.
- **Kosovo**, the newest nation in the Balkans, is the furthest from European integration. It is just beginning negotiations for an EU Stabilization and Association Agreement. The most constructive role key Central Europeans could play on Kosovo would be to convince Slovakia and Romania to recognize it as an independent state, helping to initiate its path toward Europe.

### *Overcoming the East's Challenges*

The transatlantic community's consensus breaks down on the question of further integration of the Eastern reaches of Europe. Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova's lack of further integration into transatlantic structures is due to more than just a lack of Western resolve to admit them. Considerable internal, regional and geopolitical issues also play a role for these countries. Each largely lacks experiences — however brief — of pre-war democratic traditions and free markets. Moreover, each of these potential candidate countries has a harder time convincing Western Europeans of their shared historical traditions rooted in the mainstream European political and economic development. Furthermore, Moldova and Georgia are plagued by separatist conflicts, and Russia's leadership has shown increasing hostility toward enlargement into what Moscow considers its "privileged sphere of interest." If there is to be progress on "completing Europe" to the East, Central Europe must assume a much stronger role.

And it already does. With Polish and Swedish leadership, the EU launched the Eastern Partnership to strengthen ties with neighbors who were once part of the Soviet Union. While details of the partnership remain to be defined, it offers the prospect of a credible mechanism to help these societies pursue the transformation required to draw closer to the West, much as NATO's Partnership for Peace did in the 1990s. The Eastern Partnership, however, does not offer membership perspectives. While decisions in Western Europe will shape the future of enlargement, there is a broad scope for Central Europe to press for more rapid integration.

- Chisinau's new pro-Western government, elected as a coalition entitled "the Alliance for

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European Integration,” is committed to enacting reforms that will help **Moldova** join the EU. Poor and suffering from a brain drain of its young talent, who travel to Europe with Romanian passports, Moldova has much to do to approach European norms. Now, more than any time since 1991, the country merits support and assistance; Central Europe should take the lead in ensuring this pro-reform course sets Moldova on an irreversible path. The separatist territory of Transnistria should not be allowed to block Moldova’s accession process; rather, the accession process should increase the pressure on Transnistrian leaders to reach agreement on a federal arrangement with Chisinau.

- **Ukraine** has been plagued by indecisive and ineffective leadership during its post-communist transition. In April 2008, the North Atlantic Alliance failed to reach consensus on a Membership Action Plan for Ukraine, but agreed that Ukraine “would be part of NATO.” Subsequently, Viktor Yanukovich won the presidential election and his Party of Regions formed a new government, ending Ukraine’s NATO aspirations. While the Ukrainian public has been divided about the prospect of joining NATO, membership in the EU enjoys popular support and governmental backing. If Ukraine is ever to become a serious candidate, it must undergo a fundamental set of reforms that would transform its society. Central Europe is poised to play one of the most important roles in supporting civil society, welcoming Ukrainian students and tourists, pressing the government to avoid democratic backsliding and keeping Ukraine on the agenda in the EU.
- Unique in the region, Georgians share an enlightened vision of their country joining the West and entering NATO and the EU. In 2008, the Alliance also agreed that **Georgia** “would be part of NATO;” however, the August 2008 Russian-Georgian War set back its ambitions. Nonetheless, Central Europeans can play an important role by advocating for a more substantive NATO-Georgia Commission and encouraging the United States to normalize military-to-military relations by resuming security cooperation and defensive arms sales. Central Europeans can also advocate for an early, deep and comprehensive EU-Georgia free trade agreement. Regional leaders should use frequent engagement with President Mikheil Saakashvili to encourage Georgia to consolidate democratic institutions in the run-up to the pivotal test elections in 2012 and 2013.
- While **Belarus** is neither an aspirant nor a viable candidate for EU or NATO membership, it is a country on Europe’s Eastern approaches in which the action of Central Europeans is critical. Belarus’ democratic neighbors have a vital role to play in backing civil society and independent media with material assistance and political support, and by allowing regime opponents to operate freely on their territory. Through repression and bloody crackdowns, President Aleksandr Lukashenko has demonstrated that he can never lead Belarus to Europe. Central Europeans can help the people of Belarus determine their own destiny sooner rather than later.

### **Today’s U.S.-Central Europe Partnership**

Since 1989, U.S. relations with Central Europe have centered around great endeavors:

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- Helping the post-communist Central European societies implement far-reaching reforms to transform their nations into stable free market democracies;
- Working together to achieve membership in NATO followed by U.S. cheerleading for membership in the EU;
- Cooperating on demanding military operations far from the region, first in Afghanistan and then Iraq.

Yet in 2008, many in the region began to question the value and purpose of the relationship with the United States, when Washington remained behind the scenes as the region struggled to weather a severe economic and financial crisis and while its people became increasingly exposed to EU structures and culture. There was no longer a purposeful project to bring Central Europe and the United States together in a unique partnership. But this does not need to be the case. In fact, U.S. and European interests in a Europe whole and free demand a closer partnership. A vision backed by policies to draw Central Europe's neighbors in the Western Balkans and Europe's East into the transatlantic community provides a compelling reason for stronger U.S.-Central European relations.

Ultimately, completing Europe is not about NATO and EU enlargement. Rather, it is about assisting societies so they succeed in their efforts to embrace the values and practices of the

### **A VISION TO DRAW THE COUNTRIES OF THE WESTERN BALKANS AND EUROPE'S EAST INTO THE TRANSATLANTIC COMMUNITY PROVIDES A COMPELLING REASON FOR STRONGER U.S.-CENTRAL EUROPEAN RELATIONS.**

European mainstream — democracy, free markets, open media, individual liberties and the rule of law. As these societies transform, discussions of and then decisions about membership in the EU and NATO should follow.

“Europe whole, free and secure” remains a valid vision and policy. But it needs champions. It is time for a new generation of leaders in Europe and North America to apply this strategy and extend this opportunity unequivocally to the Western

Balkans and Europe's East. Rather than being the battleground for great power struggles over the future of Europe, for the first time in modern history, Central Europe is poised to shape the future of the continent as never before.