



ISSUE BRIEF

# Broken Embraces

## Is Central Europe Falling Out of Love with the West?

NOVEMBER 2016 JEFFREY GEDMIN  
AND SIMONA KORDOSOVA LIGHTFOOT

Europe immediately after the Cold War looked to be at the dawn of a golden age. For its part, the United States had a vision.

For the Clinton administration in the 1990s, NATO enlargement constituted part of a broader global strategy. The end of the Cold War presented “a moment of immense democratic and entrepreneurial opportunity,” argued Bill Clinton’s national security advisor Anthony Lake in 1993—a historic window to enlarge “the world’s free community of market democracies.”<sup>1</sup> In 1999, NATO expanded eastward to include Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic (Slovakia, along with six other Eastern European nations, joined the Alliance in a next tranche in 2004). During this period, a complementary process was taking place. The European Union (EU) was expanding as well. The 1993 Copenhagen criteria required that EU accession candidates demonstrate “stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, respect for and protection of minorities, [and] the existence of a functioning market economy.”<sup>2</sup>

There was a broader context for these developments. The process of enlargement was coupled with the idea of forging a new cooperation with Russia to create an undivided, free, and prosperous Europe in which Russians would find their peaceful, rightful place. Indeed, in the early 1990s, Russia was not opposed to this vision. There were even those who believed that NATO membership for Russia was not beyond the realm of possibility. It was Russian President Boris Yeltsin who introduced the idea with a note to NATO in December 1991, raising the question of Russian membership in the Alliance as a long-term objective. It is easy to forget how warmly the post-Cold War period began. In August of that year, Yeltsin had welcomed American-funded Radio Liberty to Moscow, praising the US broadcaster for its “role in objectively informing the citizens of the Russian Republic and the world at large about the course of the democratic processes in Russia.”<sup>3</sup>

The Atlantic Council **Future Europe Initiative** seeks to galvanize the leadership and strategies that will promote a strong, stable, and competitive Europe allied with the United States. The Initiative champions the Atlantic community’s central role in fostering a rules-based international order that brings security, prosperity, and individual freedoms to its people. It also fosters US strategic engagement in Europe, premised on the belief that the United States is stronger with allies and that the US has a strategic stake in Europe’s future and a united Atlantic community.

1 Anthony Lake, “From Containment to Enlargement,” US Department of State Dispatch, Bureau of Public Affairs, Vol. 4, No. 39, Article 3, September 27, 1993, <http://dosfan.lib.uic.edu/ERC/briefing/dispatch/1993/html/Dispatchv4no39.html>.  
2 “Accession criteria (Copenhagen criteria),” EUR-Lex, [http://eurlex.europa.eu/summary/glossary/accession\\_criteria\\_copenhagen.html](http://eurlex.europa.eu/summary/glossary/accession_criteria_copenhagen.html).  
3 R. Eugene Parta, *Discovering the Hidden Listener: An Assessment of Radio Liberty and*

Throughout much of the 1990s, then, progress was the order of the day in Europe, it seemed. However, the best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry, as the famous paraphrase of Robert Burns goes.

A decade and a half later, Central Europe looks in some ways like a confused and muddled mess.

The Hungarian government of Viktor Orbán—a champion of “illiberal democracy”—tried, at least initially, to position itself between Moscow and Washington over Russia’s annexation of Crimea and armed intervention in east Ukraine. Poland, while taking a tougher stance on Russia, has raised alarm bells in human rights circles for what many see as its wavering commitment to rule of law and free and independent media (echoing criticism leveled against Hungary for several years now). This current Polish government also seems to love feuding with Berlin and Brussels. Much of this may be part of a populist fabric which has come to cover different parts of the world, Western Europe and the United States included. It is important that we not conflate things, or lose sight of a wider perspective. Still, it is alarming when Czech President Miloš Zeman calls for his country to hold referenda on NATO and EU membership. More ominously, Slovaks voted a virulently anti-EU, anti-NATO party—led by a one-time neo-Nazi—into the national parliament. The openly xenophobic and anti-Semitic “People’s Party Our Slovakia” won fourteen seats in spring 2016, a relatively small presence, to be sure. Yet the legitimacy accorded to an overtly anti-democratic party that now holds seats in the national legislature ought to concern the United States. Members of People’s Party Our Slovakia pledge “to sacrifice” themselves in the fight against “parasites and thieves” in Slovak politics.<sup>4</sup>

“Elites in America might have thought the world had reached ‘the end of history,’” writes Gary Schmitt of

American Enterprise Institute, “but Poles, Hungarians, and Czechs [and Slovaks] were not so sure.”<sup>5</sup>

How did history return to the region so quickly?

To be clear: no, the region is not falling apart. Democracy is not disintegrating; markets are not collapsing. Yet Central Europe is far from where the United States thought it would be, and alarming trends deserve careful attention. There has been backsliding, a weakening of the rule of law, and troubling state-sponsored (and tolerated) corruption. Today, Europe’s refugee crisis, coupled with continuing economic stagnation and a spate of terrorism over the last two years—including attacks in Paris, Brussels, and Nice—may be moving the continent as a whole to a crossroads. Populism and

demagoguery are finding a footing across Europe in ways unimaginable just a few years ago. Central (and Eastern) Europe show signs of a particular vulnerability to backlash against democracy, pluralism, open economy, and transatlantic institutions. To understand developments in the Visegrád Four countries, it is important to take into account a confluence of factors. The following four points ought to top any list:

First, many believed that Central Europe would quickly and easily graduate from the “school of democracy.” Communism had lost

the Cold War; the West and democratic capitalism had prevailed. Prospective membership in both NATO and the EU provided incentives for aspirant members to prove their democratic bona fides. Indeed, in a relatively short amount of time, there were fair and free elections across the region. Secret police were abolished and free media and independent courts were established, or at least started, as reformers dismantled the old communist monopolies. The West celebrated Václav Havel in the 1990s, the fabled playwright turned dissident turned president, who in many ways embodied the spirit of openness, tolerance, and accountability for which most in the region had been yearning.

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*Western Broadcasting to the USSR during the Cold War* (Hoover Institution Press, 2007), Preface, [http://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/978-0-8179-4732-3\\_xv.pdf](http://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/978-0-8179-4732-3_xv.pdf).

4 “About Us,” People’s Party Our Slovakia, <http://www.naseslovensko.net/en/about-us/>.

5 Gary Schmitt, *Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic: The Security Record of “New Europe,”* American Enterprise Institute, November 2016.



The Polish Committee of the Defence of Democracy (KOD) held a demonstration for free media (*wolne media*) and democracy in Krakow, Poland on January 9, 2016. This Committee, founded in Warsaw in 2015, has organized the largest protests in Poland since the fall of communism with the aim of defending European values, strengthening civil society, and protecting the rule of law, democracy and human rights. *Photo credit: iStock.*

Did anyone fully consider, though, the damage that had been done by forty years of communist rule, and the pernicious legacy of totalitarianism? Institutions could be planted relatively quickly, but was more needed to sink deep and durable roots? What would it take for the values, habits, and behaviors of a new democratic culture to take hold? In his first speech as president, ushering in the new year in 1990, Havel spoke not only of the economic, environmental, and infrastructural damage done to the country, but also of the destruction of civil society, and the assault on the nation's moral fiber. It is the last of these things that takes time and is so hard to restore. "The de-communizing countries of the region overlooked to a large extent the vexing, yet unavoidable problems tied to history, psychology and identity," says Louisa Slavkova, a visiting fellow at Columbia University's Institute for the Study of Human Rights. "Institutions

matter, greatly, of course," observes Slavkova, "but the political culture that follows takes longer to change."<sup>6</sup>

As Havel put it in that first New Year's address as president:

"The worst thing is that we live in a contaminated moral environment. We fell morally ill because we became used to saying something different from what we thought. We learned not to believe in anything, to ignore one another, to care only about ourselves. Concepts such as love, friendship, compassion, humility, or forgiveness lost their depth and dimension, and for many of us they represented only psychological peculiarities, or they resembled gone-astray greetings from ancient times."

<sup>6</sup> In-person conversation with Louisa Slavkova, Visiting Fellow, Columbia University, September 5, 2016.

It turns out that such immense damage would not be overcome in a short amount of time. Corruption has persisted; new kleptocratic structures have in some instances replaced the communist hoarding of wealth and power of the past. Did we—both in the West and in the East—have realistic expectations of how long the transition would take, and how difficult and uneven the transformation would be from communism to democracy and capitalism? In retrospect, such a transition required far greater attention, nurturing, and vigilance.

Second, the United States, while at first likely overestimating its influence in assisting the region's transition, almost certainly underestimated—after an initial decade of progress—the effect of its subsequent disengagement. The 1990s were a period of optimism, prosperity, and, when it counted, bipartisanship in the United States (conservative Republican and Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Jesse Helms joined Democratic President Bill Clinton in advancing the cause for enlarging NATO). Wherever one looked, the West was winning. The United States led a coalition and ejected Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in the first Gulf War in 1991. With US leadership, NATO fought and won wars in Bosnia (1992-1995) and Kosovo (1998-1999). In each case, slaughter was ended, malign nationalism defeated. Central Europeans joined the effort, and experienced what it was like to be on the right side of history.

The Soviet threat had disappeared, and rule of law and human rights for Central Europe were, in the minds of many, a foregone conclusion. It surely helped that fledgling democracies of the region could tackle problems of transition and begin to evolve under the umbrella of NATO protection. The September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States changed nearly everything. The United States pivoted to the war on terror. This meant sudden and dramatic shifts in diplomatic and political capital, and enormous reallocations of military and economic resources. US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the former in particular, would stir controversy and eventually do significant damage to the credibility of the United States with many European allies, its friends in “New Europe” included. How different things might have been had victory been attained in Iraq (or, at least, had weapons of mass destruction been found). In the context of failure, however, a string of other problems was magnified: Guantanamo, National Security Agency spying, secret Central Intelligence Agency facilities. The abrupt change in plans for missile

defense by the Barack Obama administration in 2009 was especially jarring for many Central Europeans. Yes, there was NATO's Article 5, but would the United States really come to the defense of the region in the event of Russian aggression? American inaction in the aftermath of Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia, a failed reset policy, Moscow's January 2009 decision to cut off gas deliveries to Ukraine—affecting Slovakia and Hungary during a cold winter—all bolstered the view in Central Europe that the United States could not be relied on.

Then, too, there was the United States' second pivot, this time to Asia under President Obama, and a deepening impression across the continent that the United States had come to view Europe as diminishing in strategic relevance. Perhaps it was so in relative terms. Was the Obama thesis so wrong at face value, namely that the EU was now strong enough to tend to its own affairs? In addition, Russia, unlike China, could have hardly been deemed a rising power at that time. In the context of new threats, stepping back from both old and new Europe did not seem at all unreasonable. It turned out to be a great miscalculation, however. As US foreign policy weaved, Europe wobbled. As the United States pivoted away, a resurgent Russia pivoted back. As the adage goes, nature indeed abhors vacuums.

Third, Russia returned with a vengeance to settle a score. “NATO and the United States wanted complete victory over the Soviet Union,” contended President Vladimir Putin earlier this year; “they wanted to sit on the throne of Europe alone.”<sup>7</sup> As Russia returned to authoritarian rule, its foreign policies have been increasingly aggressive and hostile to US and Western interests. At NATO's 2008 summit in Bucharest, Germany and France argued against the proposal of the Bush administration to extend the Alliance's Membership Action Plan (MAP)—a package of advice and practical assistance for aspirant countries—to Georgia and Ukraine, chiefly on the grounds that such a step would anger and provoke Moscow. As a result of a desire to placate Russia, MAP for both countries was taken off the table in April. Four months later, Russian forces had gobbled up the Georgian provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, with tanks idling just forty miles outside the capital of Tbilisi. Today, Russia controls annexed Crimea and the Donbas region of

7 Chase Winter, “Putin: US and NATO Want to ‘Sit on the Throne in Europe Alone,’” Die Welle, January 11, 2016, <http://www.dw.com/en/putin-us-and-nato-want-to-sit-on-the-throne-in-europe-alone/a-18970836>.

Ukraine. Moscow has helped create a frozen conflict in Moldova. It threatens Baltic members of NATO (and non-NATO members Sweden and Finland in Scandinavia). Through espionage, bribery, corruption, propaganda, and the use of energy as a strategic weapon, Russia seeks to weaken, splinter, and divide Europe as a whole.

It might well be that what began as an attempt to split Europe into spheres of influences has evolved now into a larger project aimed at undermining democracy across the West. President Putin is an opportunist par excellence, with a bold and brazen authoritarian vision, advanced by a strategy of building Russia up by cutting the United States and Europe down. What perhaps started with Kremlin policies focusing on ex-Soviet republics and countries of the former Warsaw Pact seems to have evolved and become more ambitious.

Of course, none of this is to suggest that Putin is the source of the United States' problems. In Central Europe, to be sure, problems are homegrown. But Putin's Kremlin is the nudger, the stoker, a shrewd and energetic investor in illiberalism, malign nationalism, discord, and disarray. According to a recent report by the European Council on Foreign Relations, there are now forty-five populist parties on the rise across Europe. Whether mainstream—i.e., simply Brussels-critical and Eurosceptic—or far right or left-wing radical, Russia cheers these forces on, in some cases providing advice and financial assistance. The continent's new populism fares especially well in Central and Eastern Europe, where the roots of democracy remain shallow, and where Russia's influence is considerable.

Fourth, the European Union is in trouble, and not just because of Brexit. The United Kingdom's decision this summer to leave the EU is as much a symptom as it is the cause of the EU's current woes. Aging populations, declining birth rates, low-growth economies, and high youth unemployment in a number of countries do not bode well for the future of the continent. The prospect of more refugees and more terrorism, alongside more Russia and less United States in Europe, ought to

concern the entire transatlantic community. Projecting from present circumstances, will the United Kingdom really be the last country to leave the EU? In light of recent bailouts—three in a half-dozen years—will Greece still be a member of the Eurozone five years from now? For those conservatives in Britain, the United States, and across Europe who would welcome the evolution of the EU to a looser model of free-trading, liberal, democratic nation states—ending the grand experiment in supranationalism and the surrender of sovereignty—is there a sensible path at present to a gentle and safe landing? Liberal, democratic nation states function properly and prosper when democracy is healthy and threats from abroad are held at bay.

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In some intellectual circles in Central and Eastern Europe, a new moral relativism is on the rise. This may soon become part of what drives the forces of disunity today across Central and Eastern Europe. If the West is a mess, and the United States and the EU have failed to deliver in critical ways, perhaps it is time to give others a hearing, or at least be “more balanced.” That is the bread and butter of RT, of course, the Kremlin's propaganda television arm. With an audience purported to be some seven hundred million worldwide, and with a prodigious following through social media, Russia Today (as the channel was originally called) seeks to provide an alternative

view where objective reporting and objective truth, according to RT leadership, do not exist. RT specializes in emphasizing the shortcomings of democracy and the deficits of market capitalism. In this vein, Russian propaganda works tirelessly to focus a spotlight on US (and Western) hypocrisy and double standards. While it is difficult to measure the effect of such efforts, it is surely folly to imagine that Russian propaganda measures are fruitless. Their aim is to sow doubt and confuse, not convince.

How does the United States begin to turn any of this around? It is difficult to see anything happening without US leadership. Yet how can this happen under current circumstances? As we've learned in the United States too, free trade, globalization, and new technologies



European borders closed. In 2015 and 2016, an unprecedented number of refugees and migrants have attempted to cross into Europe. Overwhelming flows matched with a lack of consensus on solutions prompted many European leaders to close their borders to refugees and migrants, and eventually led to the full closing of the Balkans route, the main refugee route to northern Europe, in March 2016. *Photo credit: iStock.*

have created remarkable opportunities, as well as serious frictions and fissures and social wounds that will take time to heal.

For one thing, the United States must start with self-awareness. The war in Iraq hurt the United States in the eyes of its closest allies. In the view of many Europeans, a debacle started by the Bush administration was made worse by an Obama administration committed to a drawdown of American forces, seemingly without consideration for the effect on security in Iraq and across the region. The 2008 financial crisis was another blow to US leadership, and American economic standing in the world. The ensuing recession of 2008-2012, furthermore, did much to tarnish the reputation of the free enterprise system as such worldwide. The United States is hardly out of the woods. The new administration will likely continue to contend with its own populism problem, a raucous mixture of economic grievance, identity politics, and revolt against political correctness, as well as against what some have come

to view as self-dealing elites and a system rigged against the little guy. Advances in technology will likely make the United States' current political and economic challenges even more daunting in the next decade or two, as developments in artificial intelligence and robotics are apt to deepen social cleavages and cause significant dislocations in the American workforce.

Yet, for all these problems, it is important for the United States to keep in mind—and for its allies, including its friends in Central Europe to be reminded—that this country (like democracy itself) has always been a work in progress. For those shortsighted souls ready to throw in the towel on American leadership and alliances, it would be wise to recall mighty challenges from the past: in the 1960s and 1970s there was fury over desegregation and turmoil over the Vietnam War, the Cuban missile crisis, and the assassination of an American president. There was the Watergate scandal, oil shocks over a period of less than six months—from fall 1973 to spring 1974 the price of oil had sky

rocketed from three to twelve dollars a barrel—as well as runaway inflation, and a stunning proliferation of pro-Soviet regimes across the developing world. The United States managed through these things, recovering to lead in the ending of the Cold War.

The United States may indeed remain a flawed superpower today, but who else among the world’s democracies is prepared to step up to lead today? The United States does not have the luxury, just as it never did in the past, of fixing itself at home first, so that it can return to the problems of the world later.

Saving Europe is a matter for the Europeans. However, it would be foolish and dangerous for the United States to divorce itself from the future of the continent. Such a move would run directly counter to US interests. The EU must quickly discover a new flexibility and agility in its thinking about institutions and institutional arrangements. Recent reform proposals from the Visegrád Group—which started as a bloc defined by a common interest in European integration in the Hungarian castle town of Visegrád in 1991—point to growing challenges ahead. Central Europe’s Eurosceptics are banding together to challenge Brussels and Berlin over matters such as refugees and issues surrounding sovereignty. Pushback is considerable. Martin Schulz, the German Social Democrat who currently serves as president of the European Parliament, has threatened to reduce EU subsidies to Poland as punishment for the country’s unwillingness to help with refugees (earlier this year, Schulz sharply criticized Warsaw for what he termed the “Putinization” of Polish politics). EU leaders have at times used similar language to admonish Viktor Orbán for his strong, centralizing tendencies and boasts about wanting to establish an illiberal democracy in Hungary. Luxembourg’s foreign minister quipped recently that perhaps Hungary ought to be kicked out of the EU. All this is music to the ears of Vladimir Putin.

It is vital that the next American president work closely with European partners to reduce and mitigate growing polarization and fragmentation in Europe. The United States must think carefully and clearly about Central (and Eastern) Europe. Its democracy promotion

community must re-engage, with fullest cooperation and collaboration with its partners in old and new Europe. We need greater patience, too, for change in political culture and space for divergent views, within a democratic context, to be sure.

The US approach to NATO needs renewal. The Alliance will not sustain itself unless the United States is clear about purpose, and allies meet their spending obligations. The United States can also lead in other concrete ways:

- In helping to restore economic prosperity, including through promoting and strengthening digital economy, innovation, and entrepreneurship across Europe. Just as Central Europe was a favored destination of US investments in the 2000s, the United States can now share practices and capabilities to help create an “innovation hub” in the region and support local start-ups and entrepreneurs. Strengthening the relationship through trade and innovation is especially important since the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership is unlikely to be passed in the near future. Similarly, the “Three Seas Initiative”—to integrate nations between the Adriatic, Baltic, and Black Seas—is an important project in need of US leadership.
- In advancing a strong transatlantic narrative to win the hearts and minds of people, especially the next generation. The United States must emphasize its accomplishments, the gains brought by freedom, and its future potential. It must strengthen its focus on strategic communication, including through digital and social media, to push back on Russia’s propaganda. The United States has to drive energetic conversations about how it makes democracy more transparent, effective, and appealing to younger generations, so they are less inclined to look for populist alternatives.
- In setting an example in burden sharing. Central Europe has been criticized for its unwelcoming stance on refugees. The United States should be a moral leader and agree to take in more refugees. This would ease Europe’s burden, and help reverse

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the rise of populist parties that use the refugee crisis for political gains. This is a US interest, but Europe for its part must do more for defense. This will help counter the rise of populism and isolationism in the United States.

Finally, as the United States and Europe both seek to remake and rejuvenate themselves from the inside, the Kremlin will not miss an opportunity to make trouble. This means the United States urgently needs a comprehensive, integrated transatlantic strategy to contain Vladimir Putin's Russia. Such a strategy must include hard and soft power, with military, economic, and diplomatic means. The US approach toward Russia must be geared toward outcomes. This means no new Russian aggression, with red lines—real ones. It means that the Kremlin-promoted frozen conflicts of recent years must be reversed. This will take time, and patience, and resolve. If the United States is to succeed on any of these fronts, in the long run, it cannot give

up on a freer, more pluralistic Russia either. This, too, needs new thinking about how the United States can assist Russia's democrats. These ideas focus on the long haul, and will require a steady campaign against commerce-first realists, new age relativists, and those who are simply tired and far too easily seduced by Russian largess and manipulation.

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