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# THE UNITED STATES AND CENTRAL EUROPE: **A Road Map For A Democratic Post-Pandemic Agenda**

Daniel Fried · Jakub Wiśniewski · Denise Forsthuber · Alena Kudzko

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Cover image: Smoke from chimneys billows over the rooftops of downtown Prague as temperatures dropped to as low as minus 11 degrees Celsius (12.2 degrees Fahrenheit) in Prague February 4, 2012. REUTERS/David W Cerny (CZECH REPUBLIC) <https://pictures.reuters.com/archive/CZECH--GM1E8241FM901.html>

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# Introduction

A generation ago, the United States and Central Europe helped lead the West’s post-Cold War agenda of enlarging the democratic space. The peoples of Central Europe, with the support of the United States as well as Western Europe, overthrew their imposed communist regimes and enacted democratic, free-market reforms, seeking to become part of a Europe whole, free, and at peace. To this end, the United States led the enlargement of NATO and supported the enlargement of the European Union (EU) that followed. Alliance and integration with an undivided transatlantic community brought to Central Europe a generation of general peace and prosperity, to the benefit of Europe as a whole and the United States. We face different circumstances today and sharp challenges. But the core principle for success—democratic solidarity—remains. The United States and Central Europe—drawing from their best traditions—can and should show this kind of leadership, working with all of Europe and the wider Free World, to craft a democratic post-pandemic agenda.

Now, as the transatlantic community faces the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the current moment represents

both a challenge and an opportunity for Central Europe. Central Europe navigated initial phases of the crisis relatively well compared to Western Europe and the United States: taking lockdown measures swiftly and reopening in an orderly fashion. Case numbers are rising as of late September, though so far less than in France and Spain. As policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic grapple with economic recovery, the long-term questions of bringing back supply chains, and dealing with the challenge posed by China, Central Europe can and should be part of the solution. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have a strategic orientation generally attuned to the need for a robust transatlantic response, and regional leaders can rise to the moment to help shape it. But the region is also vulnerable, and various stresses could further empower illiberal forces to the detriment of the transatlantic community and the EU. While much media and expert coverage of Central Europe focuses on the latter danger, this paper, informed by the Atlantic Council and GLOBSEC’s mission of shaping the future in partnership with allies, seeks to take a broader, strategic, and more hopeful view. This paper advocates for a common agenda with Central Europe in seeking a better post-COVID-19 world.



Crew members clean the dinning area onboard the NickoVision river cruise boat following the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak in Budapest, Hungary, July 16, 2020. Picture taken July 16, 2020. REUTERS/Bernadett Szabo <https://tinyurl.com/y2q4rapa>





German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Hungary's President János Áder, Poland's President Andrzej Duda, Slovakia's President Zuzana Čaputová and Czech Republic's President Miloš Zeman place roses into a gap at the Wall memorial during a ceremony marking the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall at Bernauer Straße in Berlin, Germany, November 9, 2019. Photo by Fabrizio Bensch REUTERS, Taken November 9, 2019 <https://tinyurl.com/yxqtzbp>

So far, the COVID-19 pandemic seems to be an accelerator of bad trends, intensifying existing stresses on societies, countries, and the international system. As with individuals, it is most deadly to countries with preexisting conditions, of which the United States and Europe have plenty: economic stress; loss of confidence in institutions, including government; struggles over national identity; social inequality; and more. The pandemic also reinforces the strategic challenge from authoritarian states such as China and Russia, which use their autocratic powers for intimidation or aggression abroad and to suppress information or dissent at home. Democracies' slower responses—both the natural slowness of democracy and unnatural failures of leadership, particularly in the United States—have fueled democratic self-doubt and autocrats' arrogance. China has moved against Hong

Kong's autonomy; will Vladimir Putin follow his aggression against Ukraine with an attempt to swallow Belarus?

The worst-case scenarios include global depression, autocratic advance, and democratic fragmentation, including the United States' self-imposed isolation and domestic turmoil under President Donald J. Trump. Centrifugal forces in the EU and the incomplete character of key integration projects such as Schengen or the common currency compound the problem.

Central Europe<sup>1</sup> is especially vulnerable to darker scenarios. Its direct hit from the novel coronavirus has been limited to date, but Central Europe's integration with Europe and the transatlantic community is new and incomplete. Despite explosive

<sup>1</sup> This paper defines "Central Europe" as comprising the countries of the "Visegrád Group" (Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, and Hungary), the Baltics (Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia), Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia, and Croatia, the post-Yugoslav states now in NATO and the EU. Many of the arguments also apply as well to the Western Balkans, and to Europe's east, especially Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. But these countries face challenges different from those already "inside" the institutions of the Euroatlantic community, and they deserve separate treatment and recommendations.



Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo visits the "Thank You America" Memorial, in Pilsen, Czech Republic, on August 11, 2020. Photo by Ron Przysucha Flickr, August 11, 2020 <https://www.flickr.com/photos/statephotos/50215419443/in/album-72157715447221742/>

growth over the last thirty years, it remains poorer than most of the rest of Europe, its institutions are weaker, often in the grip of culture wars, it is less confident in its national sovereignty, and it is more strategically vulnerable to Russia and China.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, despite the fact that Central Europe has so far managed the first wave of coronavirus relatively well in terms of the number of deaths and infections, the economic impact<sup>3</sup> could be disproportionately high. The damage to the export-oriented economies in the short term, with no deep state pockets to offset it, is painful. These strains will add to the challenge of the ongoing structural transformation of manufacturing-based economies to post-industrial, green, and digital ones, particularly traumatic in societies that have barely completed their transition to a free market and democracy.

But Central Europe has faced tough times before. In the 1970s, amidst a nadir of pessimism in the region, forward-looking

thinkers in Central Europe and the United States outlined ideas that set the stage for later success. Last year, the authors of this paper—two from Central Europe and two from the United States—wrote *The United States and Central Europe: Tasks for a Second Century Together*. We concluded that the United States retains credibility in Central Europe and thus has a responsibility to play a key role there, in support of democracy and our common values. We also held that Central Europe, which championed such democratic solidarity and benefited from it, needs to step up again on behalf of those principles and the policies that flow from them. We argued, in short, that the higher ideals the United States and Central Europe acted upon a generation ago can again be applied to find new solutions to current challenges, to the benefit of the Free World.

We stand by those arguments, which, given the current challenges, are needed now as ever.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Fried, Jakub Wiśniewski, Denise Forsthuber, and Alena Kudzko, *The United States and Central Europe: Tasks for a Second Century Together*, Atlantic Council, June 2019, [https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/The\\_United\\_States\\_and\\_Central\\_Europe-Tasks\\_for\\_a\\_Second\\_Century\\_Together.pdf](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/The_United_States_and_Central_Europe-Tasks_for_a_Second_Century_Together.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> GLOBSEC, *GLOBSEC Intelligence Briefing*, June 2020, <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/GLOBSEC-Intelligence-Briefing-June-2020-1.pdf>.



# A Call for Leadership

Skeptics might question any call for US and Central European leadership in designing a path for the democratic community to emerge from the pandemic.

Some cite controversial aspects of leadership by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Poland’s ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party head, Jarosław Kaczyński, as evidence of democratic backsliding and nationalism. Indeed, support for liberal democracy is not straightforward in Central Europe. In a recent survey conducted by GLOBSEC,<sup>4</sup> only in five of ten CEE countries did more than 50 percent of respondents say they would choose liberal democracy over an autocratic leader. In four countries, the absolute majority would trade their rights and freedoms for greater security. Only 44 percent in the region trust the media. In five countries, the majority believes that it does not matter who holds power because “nothing changes.” Across the region, less than half of the population is satisfied with how democracy works in their country. These disquieting trends are not unique to Central Europe, but its vulnerability may be greater than elsewhere in Europe and North America.

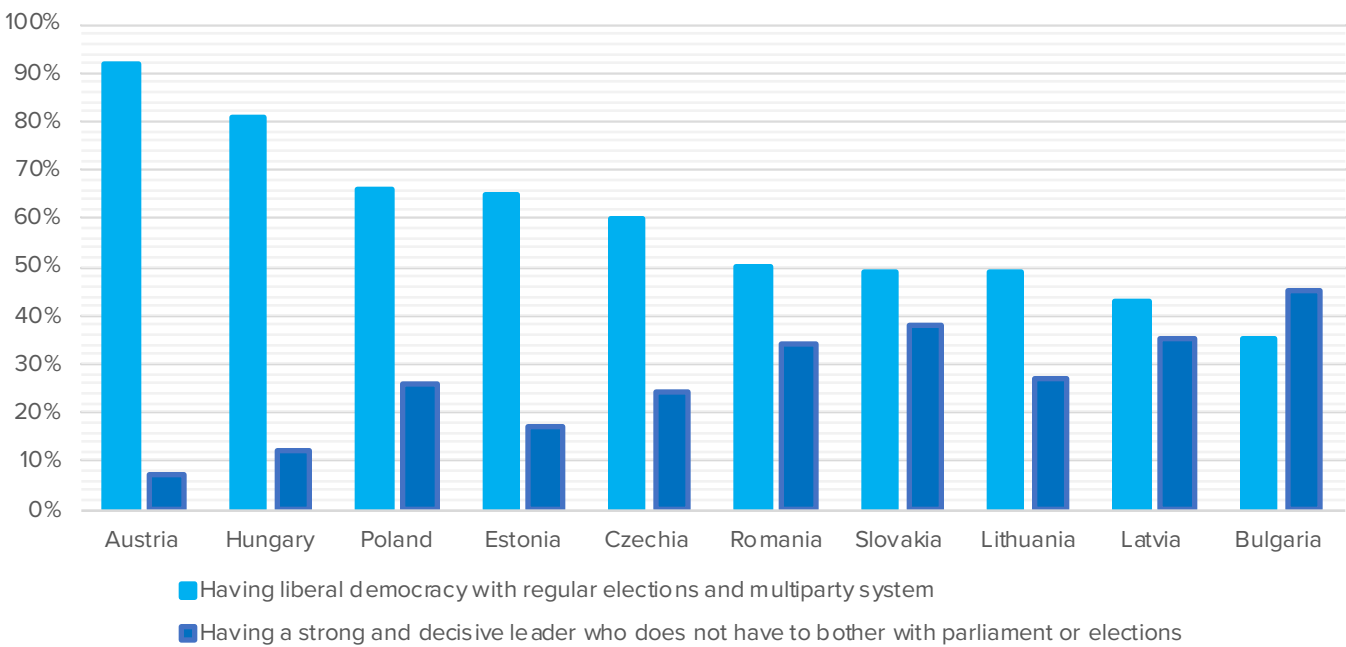
Some are apt to write off the United States specifically, citing Trump’s baleful character, unilateralist (and authoritarian-leaning) worldview, and indifferent leadership during the pandemic. US domestic tension surrounding issues of inequality and racial injustice, recalling the urban riots of the 1960s, add to this sense of US eclipse. These factors, coupled with a contentious presidential election season, lead some to say that the United States should get its house in order before turning to external challenges.

But we, nevertheless, see reasons for hope.

Democracy and pro-Western commitment show signs of vigor in Central Europe. Poland’s political system turned back dubious efforts by PiS to rush through the 2020 presidential election in the midst of the pandemic, and its presidential campaign was free and vigorously contested. The liberal opposition won a majority in the Polish Senate in last October’s parliamentary elections, while PiS held onto the presidency. In the face of sustained public support for the EU,<sup>5</sup> the Polish government has quietly toned down its Euroscepticism and anti-German posturing. Prague Mayor Zdeněk Hřib has taken on both Chinese and Russian pressure (regarding Taiwan and a statue of a Soviet general) and the speaker of the Czech Parliament visited Taiwan in the face of Chinese pressure, a remarkable example of a values-based foreign policy.<sup>6,7,8</sup> Slovak environmental and human rights activist Zuzana Čaputová won her country’s presidential election in 2019 after the murder of an independent journalist and activist wreaked havoc on the political scene.<sup>9</sup> Slovakia’s liberal coalition was voted in earlier this year. To reverse what seemed a waning pro-Western consensus in that country, Slovakia’s president, prime minister, and speaker of the parliament signed a joint statement on foreign policy reinforcing their shared commitment to the EU, NATO, democracy, human rights, and rule of law.<sup>10</sup> In Budapest, Hungarians elected a liberal mayor in 2019. Under European and domestic pressure, Orbán dropped the emergency decree he pushed through in March of this year in efforts to control the spread of COVID-19. The Baltic countries have not wavered in their devotion to transatlantic solidarity and democratic values. And in the Visegrád Group (V4), an initiative led by the mayors of Prague, Budapest, Warsaw, and Bratislava—Zdeněk Hřib, Gergely Karácsony, Rafał Trzaskowski, and Matúš Vallo, respectively—established the “Pact of Free Cities” in December 2019 to promote “collaborative self-governance and grassroots democracy.”<sup>11</sup>

4 Dominika Hajdu and Katarína Klingová, *Voices of Central and Eastern Europe: Perceptions of Democracy & Governance in 10 EU Countries*, GLOBSEC, June 2020, [https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Voices-of-Central-and-Eastern-Europe\\_read-version.pdf](https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Voices-of-Central-and-Eastern-Europe_read-version.pdf).  
5 Dominika Hajdu, Katarína Klingová, and Daniel Milo, *GLOBSEC Trends 2019: Central & Eastern Europe 30 Years After the Fall of the Iron Curtain*, GLOBSEC, June 2019, <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/GLOBSEC-Trends2019.pdf>.  
6 Lenka Ponikelska, “China Dispute Intensifies With U.S. European Ally Over Taiwan,” *Bloomberg*, August 12, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-08-12/china-dispute-intensifies-as-prague-mayor-plans-trip-to-taiwan>.  
7 BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), “Police Protecting Prague Mayor After ‘Russian Murder Plot,’” April 29, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52455223>.  
8 Helen Davidson, “Taiwan: angry China vows ‘corresponding measures’ over Czech visit,” *The Guardian*, September 1, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/01/taiwan-angry-china-vows-corresponding-measures-over-czech-visit>.  
9 Jon Allsop, “In Slovakia, a Murdered Journalist and a Pro-Press President,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, April 26, 2019, <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/jan-kuciak-slovakia-zuzana-caputova.php>.  
10 *Slovak Spectator*, “EU and NATO Membership Vital for Slovakia, Top Officials Agreed,” May 11, 2020, <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/22401738/eu-and-nato-membership-vital-for-slovakia-top-officials-agreed.html>. Read the full statement in Slovak at <https://dennikn.sk/minuta/1887151/>.  
11 Zdeněk Hřib, Gergely Karácsony, Rafał Trzaskowski, and Matúš Vallo, “How Grassroots Democracy Can Cure the Ills of Central Europe,” European Council on Foreign Relations, December 16, 2019, [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_how\\_grassroots\\_democracy\\_can\\_cure\\_the\\_ills\\_of\\_central\\_europe](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_how_grassroots_democracy_can_cure_the_ills_of_central_europe).

Which of the following forms of government is, according to you, better for your country?



In the United States, the Democratic Party’s presidential nominee, Joseph R. Biden, Jr., has made democratic and allied solidarity a centerpiece of his foreign policy, raising the expectation of an early and substantive outreach to Europe if he is elected in November.<sup>12</sup> While a second Trump administration is unlikely to pivot back to Europe (as George W. Bush did at the start of his second term), there are many Republicans, including some who have not broken with the Trump administration, who continue to advocate for the United States to lead the democratic West toward a post-pandemic world.<sup>13</sup> Domestic unrest over racial inequalities may drive reforms to address these challenges, as earlier turmoil in the United States has done, with wider support across the political spectrum.

These positive trends are taking place in parallel with a broader uptick in European resilience in the face of the pandemic. After an uneven start, the EU has stepped up: its recovery plans, unprecedented in scope and structure, could regenerate EU confidence and open the way for broader democratic self-confidence. European leaders remain devoted to transatlantic relations. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen is known to be a staunch

Atlanticist. German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron have both expressed concern about Trump’s more belligerent rhetoric directed against them but have avoided escalation.

Overall, trust has eroded in transatlantic relations but not to the point of no return. Europe’s leaders, including Central Europeans, understand all too well that for the idea of democracy to remain relevant and popular, the collective West has no other choice but to find common, and better, responses to current challenges.

We are encouraged by advances in US-Central European ties. Despite the clumsiness of Trump’s invitation to Polish President Andrzej Duda to visit Washington in the midst of Poland’s presidential election campaign and Trump’s surprise announcement of US troop withdrawals from Germany,<sup>14</sup> deepening military ties between the United States and Poland are a good thing, provided they take place in coordination with European allies. Poland and the United States signed a new US-Poland Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) in August,<sup>15</sup> following last year’s joint declaration on a US military

12 Joseph R. Biden, Jr., “Why America Must Lead Again,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 23, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/y228zkuo>.  
13 James Jay Carafano and Kurt Volker, “Building the Post-Pandemic World,” *National Interest*, May 24, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/building-post-pandemic-world-156791>.  
14 US Department of Defense, “Department of Defense Statement: U.S. European Command Force Posture Review,” July 29, 2020, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2292244/departments-of-defense-statement-us-european-command-force-posture-review/>.  
15 US State Department, “U.S.-Poland Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement,” factsheet, Office of the Spokesperson, August 15, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-poland-enhanced-defense-cooperation-agreement/>.





A worker in a protective suit disinfects a passenger plane of Smartwings airline at Vaclav Havel Airport due to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) concerns in Prague, Czech Republic, May 21, 2020. *REUTERS/David W Cerny* <https://tinyurl.com/y4vjylgc>

presence in Poland. To complement the investment made by several Central European countries in the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund<sup>16</sup>—including Poland, Romania, Estonia, Latvia, Hungary, Croatia, and Bulgaria—the United States announced a major economic commitment to the region, illustrated by US Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo’s announcement in February pledging up to \$1 billion for Three Seas energy projects.<sup>17</sup> Despite some initial apprehension (and mixed signals from Trump himself), these initiatives are developing in ways to complement, not detract from, NATO and the EU.



Prague Mayor Zdeněk Hřib, Budapest Mayor Gergely Karácsony, Bratislava Mayor Matúš Vallo, and Warsaw Mayor Rafał Trzaskowski shake hands after signing the Pact of Free Cities at the Central European University in Budapest, Hungary, December 16, 2019. *Photo by Tamas Kaszas/Reuters* <https://tinyurl.com/yyc3lyek>

We draw two conclusions from these trends, reflecting the nonpartisan work being done by the Atlantic Council<sup>18</sup> and GLOBSEC:<sup>19</sup>

1. The democratic world should and has the potential to set a post-pandemic agenda according to its values, and not let China and Russia set it according to theirs; and
2. US leadership and Central European advocacy for democratic solidarity could move the transatlantic community and wider democratic world in this direction.

The United States and Central Europe, at their best, understand that interests and values are, in the end, indivisible and that democratic solidarity is a strategic necessity, not a luxury or indulgence. We believe that the best traditions of these historic partners can be a light that guides us.

<sup>16</sup> The Three Seas Initiative is a twelve-nation effort initiated by Central European governments, initially Poland, Croatia, and Romania but now including many others, to deepen energy, transport infrastructure, and digital networks across Central Europe.

<sup>17</sup> US Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo, “The West Is Winning,” speech to the Munich Security Conference, February 19, 2020, Munich, <https://www.state.gov/the-west-is-winning/>.

<sup>18</sup> Ash Jain and Matthew Kroenig, *Present at the Re-Creation: A Global Strategy for Revitalizing, Adapting, and Defending a Rules-Based International System*, Atlantic Council, October 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Present-at-the-Recreation.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> Hajdu and Klingová, *Voices*; Hajdu, Klingová, and Milo, *GLOBSEC Trends*.

# The Agenda

The United States and Central Europe, working together, can help shape the democratic world’s post-pandemic strategy—including on economics, security, and values—in ways that strengthen the best trends in Europe since 1989: prosperity through integration, security through solidarity, and common values through the recognition that in the Western tradition even sovereign states are answerable to higher values, including the rule of law and democracy.

## Economic

**Post-pandemic recovery.** In the short run, democratic solidarity needs to be applied to coronavirus issues. One of its elements should be avoiding nationalist competition and

accepting principles of solidarity for sharing information, formulas, production capacity, and supplies of vaccines and COVID-19 treatments. Sharing used to be the default US approach, but some of Trump’s rhetoric has raised questions about whether it remains so. Central Europeans know well what lack of solidarity can mean for them in practice and can join with like-minded Americans and Europeans generally in pushing for a principled position now, before the results of the current race to develop vaccines and treatments are known. The EU Vaccine Strategy<sup>20</sup> as well as the EU’s effort to coordinate national efforts and invest in vaccine development are important steps in overcoming nationalist competition and increasing trust and solidarity. Central European countries will benefit from the scheme and should use their special ties with the United States to encourage its participation in related endeavors.



Employees work on an assembly line as the Volkswagen construction plant reopens after closing down last month due to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak in Bratislava, Slovakia, April 28, 2020. *REUTERS/Radovan Stoklasa* <https://tinyurl.com/y22vdcx>

<sup>20</sup> Jillian Deutsch, “Commission Casts Itself As World’s Vaccine Superhero,” *Politico*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-commission-casts-itself-as-worlds-vaccine-superhero/>.



**European solidarity.** Coronavirus recovery means avoiding a global depression and returning to growth. The EU (thanks to Merkel and Macron’s leadership) has broken through a divisive European debate with a proposed new mechanism for EU financial support. The fund, composed of loans and grants, will represent an unprecedented effort at solidarity with the European Commission borrowing on financial markets. Central European countries have supported the financial package and should encourage further such steps. An example might be for Poland to associate itself with emerging French-German leadership in Europe by intensifying its commitment to the Weimar Triangle (Paris, Berlin, and Warsaw) arrangement, a possibility which, happily, the new Polish National Security Strategy document<sup>21</sup> supports. Central Europeans have already started to engage constructively in the thorny European discussion on the distribution of funds. The next step would be to use new resources in part to help restructure their economies to be better fit for the post-industrial age.

**Three Seas Initiative.** While the EU will be Central Europe’s economic home, partnership with the United States will be crucial to fill the gaps. Central Europeans should increase their commitment to the Three Seas Initiative, using that to leverage increased US and EU financing for commercially-sound investment in energy, transportation, and digital infrastructure that promote cross-border development and economic growth. The framework should be coordinated with—but not bound by—green and digital priorities associated with the EU funding.

**Digital.** A commitment to joint digital ventures in Central Europe could provide a useful tool to drive the region’s economic growth in the post-pandemic economic environment. As concluded in a recent Atlantic Council report, Central Europeans “possess fundamental strengths that uniquely position the region to capitalize on the next wave of digitalization—solid education systems, a large talent pool of ‘STEM’ graduates, widely adopted digitally enabled services, and fewer technology legacies.”<sup>22</sup> These advantages, coupled with US leadership in the technology space and considerable EU funding available to finance the digital transition, provide numerous areas of collaboration. Such closer collaboration can help drive ongoing efforts to develop new transatlantic digital and technological rules and regulations. While transatlantic disagreements over digital taxation are unlikely to be resolved anytime soon, joint digital ventures will both spur growth and help increase trust needed to address the more challenging issues.



Cars pass in front of a building with Huawei’s logo in the centre of Warsaw, Poland, June 17, 2019. Taken on June 17, 2019. Photo by Kacper Pempel/REUTERS <https://tinyurl.com/y395dkqs>

The United States and Central Europe (along with other European governments and the United Kingdom) may also be natural partners in dealing with the growing influence of China. They can achieve this by defining global technological standards and building key digital and 5G infrastructure in ways that are consistent with Western security interests. Poland and Czechia have already signaled willingness to strengthen cooperation with the United States on the growing challenge of secure 5G infrastructure.<sup>23,24</sup> The United States should be sure to consult with tech-savvy Central European partners in government and the private sector about how to leverage the digital transformation, transparency, and security standards for both economic growth and greater resilience to undue influence and cyber threats. The United States should

21 Poland’s National Security Bureau, *National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland*, 2020, [https://www.bbn.gov.pl/ftp/dokumenty/National\\_Security\\_Strategy\\_of\\_the\\_Republic\\_of\\_Poland\\_2020.pdf](https://www.bbn.gov.pl/ftp/dokumenty/National_Security_Strategy_of_the_Republic_of_Poland_2020.pdf).  
22 Frances Burwell and Jörn Fleck, *The Next Phase of Digitalization in Central and Eastern Europe: 2020 and Beyond*, Atlantic Council, February 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/the-next-phase-of-digitalization-in-central-and-eastern-europe-2020-and-beyond/>.  
23 US Department of State, *Joint Statement on United States – Czech Republic Joint Declaration on 5G Security*, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-united-states-czech-republic-joint-declaration-on-5g-security/>.  
24 The White House, *U.S.-Poland Joint Declaration on 5G*, 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/u-s-poland-joint-declaration-5g/>.



Slovakia’s Prime Minister Igor Matovič, Poland’s Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, Czech Republic’s Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orbán attend a news conference at the summit of the Visegrád Group (V4) countries at Lednice Chateau, following the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak, in the village of Lednice, Czech Republic, June 11, 2020. David W Cerny REUTERS, Taken June 11, 2020 <https://tinyurl.com/y4n9rjmx>

also support Central Europe’s digital potential in ways that strengthen Western norms.

**Trade.** Central Europe’s reorientation after 1989 from a Soviet Russia to more productive European (and especially German) trading relationship—and to the wider transatlantic market—is a great success and foundation of the region’s economic progress. Conversely, the damage to Central Europe from a US-EU trade war would be massive given CEE’s place in German and other European supply chains. Central Europe (Slovakia, Czechia, and Poland in particular) was notably successful in integrating into the German auto industry supply chain and would suffer if this were disrupted as a result of an auto tariff war. Integration has also been successful in aerospace, computers, and textiles (e.g., in Romania).<sup>25</sup> Politics of nationalism, with which some

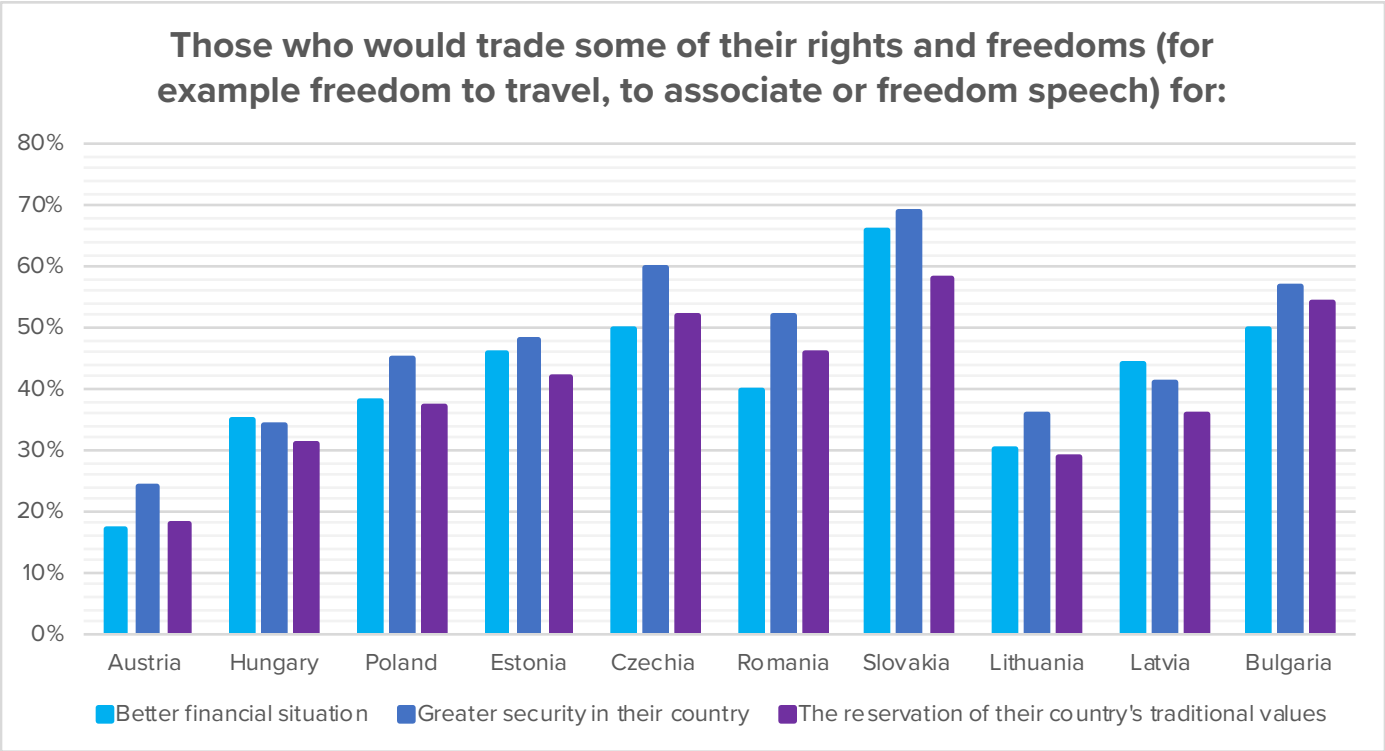
CEE governments flirt, would mean disaster if it produces nationalist trade policies as well.

Fights over the digital economy would harm a future area of potentially significant CEE economic growth. The EU is considering a digital tax while the United States has pulled out of OECD-led talks on how to update global taxation norms for the digital age, creating the possibility of another trade battle. A new US administration may intensify efforts to address transatlantic trade in more productive ways. In any case, Central European countries that cherish their transatlantic credentials (especially Poland) should get more involved in the ongoing negotiations so that talks do not slide into confrontation.

**China and “supply chain” issues.** Before the pandemic, the United States seemed at odds with most of its allies in

25 IMF Managing Director Christine Lagarde, “Strengthening the Economic Engine: Prosperity and Resilience of CESEE Economies in a Changing Trade Landscape,” speech to the 8th ECB Conference on Central, Eastern and South-Eastern European (CESEE) countries, June 12, 2019, [https://www.ecb.europa.eu/pub/conferences/shared/pdf/20190612\\_8th\\_CESEE\\_conference/Keynote\\_speech\\_Christine\\_Lagarde.pdf](https://www.ecb.europa.eu/pub/conferences/shared/pdf/20190612_8th_CESEE_conference/Keynote_speech_Christine_Lagarde.pdf).





its skeptical views of China. Central Europeans, especially, seemed poised to regard China as a threat-free source of foreign capital and were active members of the 17+1 forum to welcome Chinese investments. That seems to be changing, with the Chinese having squandered much political capital throughout Europe, including through aggressive diplomacy. In a much-discussed white paper in 2019, the European Commission referred to China as a “systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance.”<sup>26</sup> The EU has also named China, on par with Russia, as a source of disinformation aimed at undermining Western democracies.<sup>27</sup> The moment is right for key democracies in Europe and Asia to develop a new approach to China that reduces Chinese leverage and puts some weight behind efforts to convince China to respect (and not exploit) the rules of the international system that has given them so much economic opportunity over the past generation. US acceptance of the EU’s invitation to create a formal US-EU dialogue is a laudable step toward developing a shared understanding of China and addressing shared concerns.<sup>28, 29</sup>

In this context, the United States and Central Europe may have converging interests on two major pieces of such

an emerging policy. One is the question of “supply chain” issues, which is another way of saying that China should not be a sole or near-sole source for production of critical articles. The pandemic has revealed the vulnerability of major Western countries that have, over the past decades, outsourced major manufacturing and pharmaceutical industries. A critical conversation has been sparked over the past few months on the balance between strategic interests and bottom-line optimization. Such a debate could devolve into lobby-driven protectionism and calls for renationalization of production. A better alternative could be thinking of critical supply chains as something shared among democratic countries, perhaps as part of “Free World” trade arrangements (as suggested by the Atlantic Council and others<sup>30</sup>). Under such a scenario, Central Europe would be an ideal source for “near-sourcing” production for the rest of the EU, while Mexico (and Canada) do the same for the United States. Polish officials and non-government specialists have been talking about just such arrangements.

**Foreign investment.** Another area of converging US and Central European interests that is applicable to the

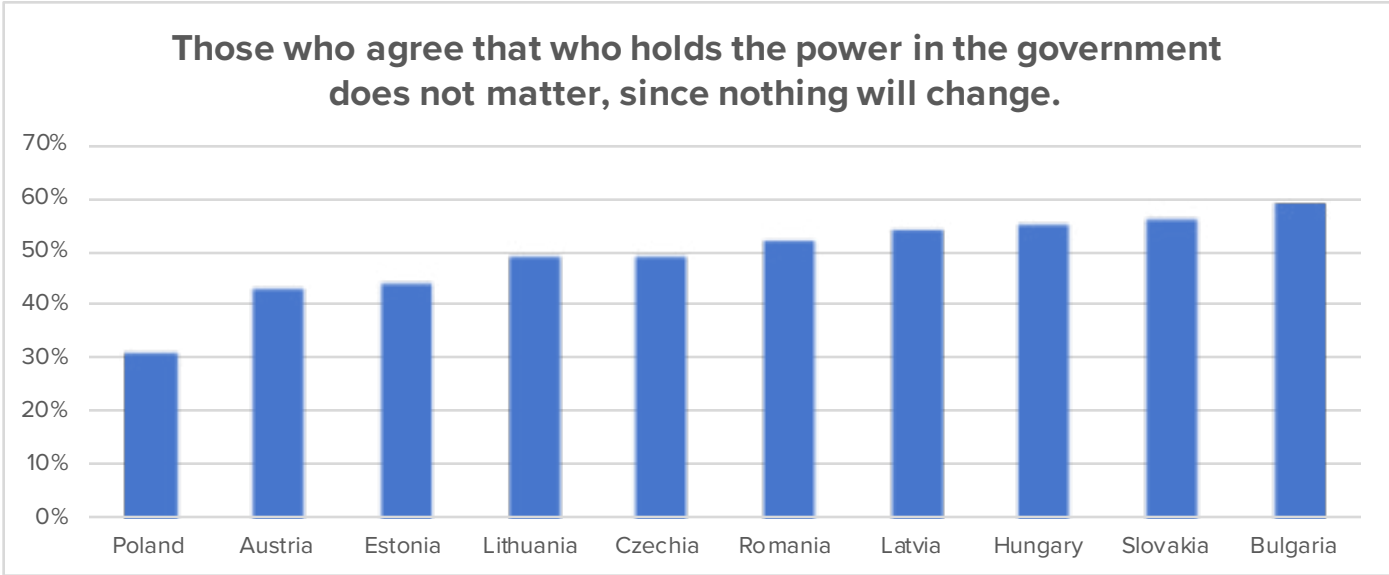
26 European Commission, *EU-China: A Strategic Outlook*, March 12, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/yxdunktl>

27 European Commission, *Coronavirus: EU strengthens action to tackle disinformation*, press release, June 10, 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_1006](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1006).

28 Robin Emmott, “U.S. and EU Must Face Down China Together, Pompeo Says,” *Reuters*, June 25, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-china-pompeo-eu/u-s-and-eu-must-face-down-china-together-pompeo-says-idUSKBN23W2KA>.

29 David M. Herszenhorn, “Pompeo Says U.S. Ready to Team Up on China, But E.U. Eyes a Post-Trump World,” *Politico*, June 25, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/06/25/pompeo-says-us-ready-to-team-up-on-china-but-eu-eyes-a-post-trump-world-340103>.

30 Jain and Kroenig, *Present*.



challenges posed by Russia and China includes efforts to develop improved, common transatlantic standards for security screening of foreign investment, financial transparency, and anti-money laundering measures. Russian dirty money still flows through transatlantic markets (real estate and others) with too few restrictions or transparency requirements. Chinese investment often hides behind front companies. The United States, the UK, and other points throughout Europe are often targets for such funds, but Central Europe is more vulnerable. This effort could be designed as a US-EU-UK project (using the methodology of the OECD initiatives such as the fight against Base Erosion and Profit Shifting, BEPS),<sup>31</sup> or a G7 project, but Central Europe should be a strong advocate in any case, pushing the United States and Western European powers to act, as it has done in the past.

Security

**Russia.** Central Europe and the United States should keep pushing for sustained transatlantic solidarity to manage the threat from Putin’s Russia, notwithstanding pandemic distractions. The sag in oil and gas prices, and the strain of the coronavirus, add to Russia’s structural weakness stemming from its kleptocratic, oligarchical economy, which is based on the extraction of raw materials. But whatever the longer-term questions about Putinism’s viability, short-term dangers remain.

**NATO.** Resisting Putinist aggression will require maintaining a NATO (including US) combat presence in the Baltics

and Poland while strengthening support and, especially, increased mobility for reinforcements.<sup>32</sup> The Trump administration’s decision to withdraw about a third of US troops currently stationed in Germany is not a good sign. Poland understandably has offered to host US troops pulling out of Germany, but Poland (which has cultivated good relations with the Trump administration) should instead put its weight behind NATO solidarity and avoid treating the US security presence in Europe as a bilateral initiative. Whatever the reasons behind the abrupt US announcement, it appears to weaken allied solidarity and Poland should be careful before it seeks to compete with Germany at the expense of NATO as a whole. Fortunately, in his June 24, 2020, press conference with Trump, Duda spoke of security in NATO and European terms, avoiding a bilateral-only approach.

**European defense initiatives.** NATO will remain the cornerstone of European security, but Europeans must follow-up on their pledge to augment their defense and security role. While allies should be attentive to risks and rhetoric on both sides suggesting decoupling, more robust European defense integration, coupled with increases in capabilities, will benefit the United States and Central Europe alike. The United States should support engagement of CEE countries with European counterparts on the European defense agenda to ensure that European projects adhere to interoperability principles, deliver tangible outputs, cohere with NATO’s needs, and fill NATO’s capability gaps instead of creating duplications. EU-UK-US-NATO cooperation is also indispensable

31 OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), “Base Erosion and Profit Shifting,” accessed September 1, 2020, <https://www.oecd.org/tax/beps/>.

32 General Philip M. Breedlove, USAF (Ret.) and Ambassador Alexander R. Vershbow (Ret.), *Permanent Deterrence: Enhancements to the US Military Presence in North Central Europe*, Atlantic Council, February 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Permanent-Deterrence.pdf>.





Allseas' deep sea pipe laying ship Solitaire lays pipes for Nord Stream 2 pipeline in the Baltic Sea September 13, 2019. Picture taken. Taken on September 13, 2019. Photo by Stine Jacobsen/REUTERS <https://tinyurl.com/y46y2pu4>

in the area of military mobility, and such projects can have ancillary economic benefits for Central Europe.<sup>33</sup>

**Counter-disinformation.** Central Europeans were warning about Russian disinformation and cyberattacks before it was fashionable in countries further west. They now have the rare luxury of receiving others' acknowledgement that they were right without the catastrophic consequences that often accompany hard lessons learned. Those in Western Europe who thought that Russian cyber aggression had little to do with them are discovering their error. Germany, for example, has called for the EU to apply sanctions against Russian officials responsible for a cyberattack on the German parliament.<sup>34</sup> Central Europeans have had some success in pushing the EU to keep developing democratic means of limiting Russian exploitation of social media and

should keep it up, working with like-minded Americans. Sadly, Trump's current fight with social media may hinder the United States' ability to develop policies to deal with foreign disinformation; the United States will catch up to Europe when it is able. The European Commission has the lead in Europe on counter-disinformation policy, but experience shows that the European Commission works better when it has political and substantive support from committed member states; Central Europe can be a champion of stronger disinformation policies, joined by the United States when it is ready, working with the EU.

**Energy geopolitics.** Central Europe and the United States were early in recognizing the challenge of Russian energy leverage over Europe, where Russia uses its position as a major (and in some cases, principal or even sole) supplier

of natural gas. The EU, after a slow start, has made significant progress in reducing this vulnerability. EU regulations, especially the anti-monopoly and transparency features of the EU Third Energy Package, the massive growth in US gas export and CEE LNG import capacity, and a growing network of secondary gas pipelines allowing for gas (even Russian-origin gas) to flow from Germany to Central European customers are changing the strategic picture, weakening the Kremlin's ability to use its position as gas supplier for political leverage.

The Kremlin-backed Nord Stream I and II gas pipelines remain anomalous and unfortunate exceptions. Most Central Europeans and the United States remain opposed to Nord Stream II, a persistent sore point with Germany. US senators recently threatened sanctions against a German town involved in Nord Stream II, a move that infuriated many in Germany.<sup>35</sup> US sanctions legislation targeting Nord Stream II thus far has been narrow in its focus; though still a problem for Germany, it should prove manageable if the current bills are not sharpened. Notwithstanding this difference, Central Europe, the United States, Germany, and the EU should build on what is common in their approach, specifically by continuing to increase Central European energy diversity and security, including by putting more resources into energy infrastructure projects being developed under the auspices of the Three Seas Initiative and applying the EU's Third Energy Package, with its laudable anti-monopoly provisions, to Russian energy projects. While differences over Nord Stream will persist, the United States and Central Europe should work with the EU (and Germany) to mitigate its downside risks.

Common Values

The United States did not always apply values to its assessment of its interests in Central Europe, for example, during interwar isolationism, in some of its World War II diplomacy with the Soviet Union, and during the early phases of "détente" with the Soviet Union in the early 1970s. But US policy was most successful in Central Europe when it took values seriously and acted to advance them. This included the Jimmy Carter/Zbigniew Brzezinski policy toward Central Europe in the late 1970s, Ronald Reagan's support for Solidarity, George H.W. Bush's skillful handling of the events of 1989, and Bill Clinton and George W. Bush's support for NATO and EU enlargement.

Central Europeans, on the other hand, consistently appealed to common values when approaching the United States. Throughout the Cold War and after they acted, in a



US soldiers carry flags of both Poland and the United States before the opening ceremony of the first United States Air Force (USAF) aviation detachment in Poland, at an air force base in Łask near Łódź, central Poland, November 9, 2012. The United States launched its first permanent military presence on Polish soil on Friday, an air force detachment to service warplanes, in a move long sought by its NATO ally Warsaw. Taken on November 9, 2012. Photo by Kacper Pempel/REUTERS <https://tinyurl.com/y4u3gjck>

sense, as the conscience of the West, they reminded the United States and other Western powers of the real-world and human consequences of the division of Europe and imposition of communism in the region. In retrospect, they were not only right but also ultimately effective. Whatever theories of international relations may suggest, common values have proven themselves a strong basis for US-Central European relations.

**Do not play politics.** The United States should not treat Central Europe instrumentally or as a wedge against European unity. Whatever the issues between the EU and the United States, the United States should not seek to weaken Europe, as Trump's rhetoric has sometimes done (e.g., his open support of Brexit or naming the EU as a "foe"). Trump's support for stronger US-Central European ties has been a constructive part of his administration's foreign policy. But his intentions sometimes appear to be to use Central Europe as a wedge against the EU, or an example of "good," (nationalist) as opposed to "bad" ("globalist")

33 John Barter, Rastislav Káčer, and Alena Kudzko, *Towards a New Level of European Defence Competence*, GLOBSEC, February 2020, <https://www.globsec.org/publications/towards-a-new-level-of-european-defence-competence/>.  
34 Kristie Pladson, "Germany Proposes First-Ever Use of EU Cyber Sanctions Over Russia Hacking," *Deutsche Welle*, July 12, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-proposes-first-ever-use-of-eu-cyber-sanctions-over-russia-hacking/a-54144559>.

35 Tom Cotton, Ted Cruz, and Ron Johnson, "Mukran Port Letter," US Senate, August 5, 2020, <https://www.cruz.senate.gov/files/documents/Letters/2020.08.05%20Final%20Mukran%20Port%20Letter.pdf>.





A large historical white-red-white flag of Belarus is pictured inside a heart formed by demonstrators during a protest against the results of the Belarusian presidential election in Prague, Czech Republic, August 16, 2020. Photo by David W. Cerny REUTERS, Taken August 16, 2020 <https://tinyurl.com/y2je2axp>

Europeans. That puts Central Europeans in a difficult position, pitting them against their indispensable European partners, and aligns the United States with only one end of Central Europe’s political spectrum.

The United States should recall that for many years after the collapse of communism in 1989, it supported Central Europe’s democratically elected governments, whether liberal, social democratic, conservative, or simply made of exotic coalitions. The United States championed Central Europe’s entry into both NATO and the EU and, despite the unfounded suspicions of some Western Europeans, did not look at Central Europe as a “Trojan horse” against a strong Europe. When the United States appeared to play favorites in Central European politics, it usually failed. The United States needs to respect the democratic choices that the peoples of Central Europe will make. Trump’s appearance of partisan support for right-wing Central European leaders risks weakening the non-political underpinnings of US-Central European relations. A Biden administration, if it comes to power in January 2021, should avoid doing the same and not “punish” countries that were close to the United States during the Trump administration.

Central Europeans should recall that, starting in the 1980s, democratic dissidents cultivated ties across the US political and ethnic spectrum, from right to left; they continued to do so once in government after 1989. The governments in the region could draw on this political investment during the challenging early years of economic transformation and the drama of the NATO enlargement debate. Attempts to align with the Trump administration on a partisan basis, as has been displayed by Hungary, are a mistake that risks making relations vulnerable to a change of administration in the United States. Central Europeans should maintain a bipartisan approach and not invest all in one or another US political option.

**Stand by the fundamentals.** Drawing on these successful traditions of nonpartisanship, we recommend that in addressing potential problems of democratic governance in Central Europe, the United States distinguish fundamentals of the rule of law, freedom of media, respect for minorities, and other basics from issues of culture, conservative or religious values, and normal partisan fluctuations. Should governments act to undermine these fundamentals, the United States should be clear in communicating its concerns. When the United States does speak out, in private or in public,

it needs to do so with credibility and precision. As Central Europe’s democratic dissidents insistently recalled during the communist era, state sovereignty is not absolute; in the Western tradition, justly ruling governments are bound by higher values that include the rule of law and democracy.

At the same time, the United States should sustain and expand its outreach to independent civil society and the people of Central Europe. Programs that brought US and Central European societies together in the past—student exchanges, summer job programs, and other exchanges—have dwindled in recent years and should be expanded, not lost. Outreach to and support for civil society groups, especially those active in less-advantaged parts of Central Europe should be renewed. Party-to-party ties—through the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute, for example—should be bolstered, and support for independent media and anti-corruption organizations should continue. Such policies are both inexpensive and, in the longer term, effective ways of supporting the shared common values between the United States and Central Europe under current conditions.

**Look outward.** Central Europe and the United States have a common interest in supporting sovereignty, democracy, and free market reform, and, if the peoples of these countries so choose, ultimately the Western orientation of Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and Belarus. The United States has greater resources; Central Europe, given its recent history of transformation, has a deeper understanding of the dynamics inside its countries. The current protests in Belarus are one such opportunity for cooperation. Democracy, and the struggle to gain it, is more recent memory among Central Europeans, and across Central Europe citizens and governments have already signaled strong support for the Belarusian people.<sup>36,37</sup> Together, and working with the EU, the United States and Central Europe should deepen their commitment to supporting such goals while keeping near-term expectations under control. This should include economic and security support, but the underlying objective is, as Ukrainian, Belarusian, and other pro-democracy activists have made clear, a values-based commitment to join the wider democratic world.

36 Jiri Skacel, Agnieszka Barteczko, Robert Muller, Catherine Evans, “Hundreds gather in Prague, Warsaw to support Belarus protesters,” *Reuters*, August 16, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-belarus-election-czech/hundreds-gather-in-prague-warsaw-to-support-belarus-protesters-idUSKCN25C0S0>.  
37 Edit Inotai, Claudia Ciobanu, Miroslava German Sirotnikova and Nicholas Watson, “Democracy Digest: From Top to Bottom, Central Europe Comes Out in Support of Belarus,” *Balkan Insight*, August 21, 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/08/21/democracy-digest-from-top-to-bottom-central-europe-comes-out-in-support-of-belarus/>.



# The Path Forward

An accumulation of challenges, topped off by the COVID-19 pandemic, has put a stress test on the democratic world, including Central Europe and the United States. Rather than think defensively, we have outlined an agenda suggesting areas where the United States and Central Europe can pool efforts, working together with the EU and within NATO. The values and best practices that brought success in the Cold War and in the generation after 1989 remain valid, but they need to be applied in new ways to suit current conditions. The agenda we have suggested—economics, security, and common values—is intended to support thinking in both Central Europe and the United States (whether a Trump II or Biden administration) about US-Central European relations and how they fit within the larger effort to frame a post-COVID- 19 agenda for the wider democratic world.



A subway driver covering his mouth with a scarf walks past a train as Prague City Hall bans all passengers without face protection from the public transport to slow the spread of the new coronavirus disease (COVID-19), in Prague, Czech Republic. Taken on March 17, 2020. Photo by David W Cerny/REUTERS <https://tinyurl.com/y52ksjak>



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### Ambassador Daniel Fried

In the course of his forty-year Foreign Service career, Ambassador Fried played a key role in designing and implementing American policy in Europe after the fall of the Soviet Union. As Special Assistant and NSC Senior Director for Presidents Clinton and Bush, Ambassador to Poland, and Assistant Secretary of State for Europe (2005-09), Ambassador Fried helped craft the policy of NATO enlargement to Central European nations and, in parallel, NATO-Russia relations, thus advancing the goal of Europe whole, free, and at peace. During those years, the West's community of democracy and security grew in Europe. Ambassador Fried helped lead the West's response to Moscow's aggression against Ukraine starting in 2014: as State Department Coordinator for Sanctions Policy, he crafted U.S. sanctions against Russia, the largest U.S. sanctions program to date, and negotiated the imposition of similar sanctions by Europe, Canada, Japan and Australia.

Ambassador Fried became one of the U.S. government's foremost experts on Central and Eastern Europe and Russia. While a student, he lived in Moscow, majored in Soviet Studies and History at Cornell University (BA magna cum laude 1975) and received an MA from Columbia's Russian Institute and School of International Affairs in 1977. He joined the U.S. Foreign Service later that year, serving overseas in Leningrad (Human Rights, Baltic affairs, and Consular Officer), and Belgrade (Political Officer); and in the Office of Soviet Affairs in the State Department.

As Polish Desk Officer in the late 1980s, Fried was one of the first in Washington to recognize the impending collapse of Communism in Poland, and helped develop the immediate response of the George H.W. Bush Administration to these developments. As Political Counselor at the U.S. Embassy in Warsaw (1990-93), Fried witnessed Poland's difficult but ultimately successful free market, democratic transformation, working with successive Polish governments.

Ambassador Fried also served as the State Department's first Special Envoy for the Closure of the Guantanamo (GTMO) Detainee Facility. He established procedures for the transfer of individual detainees and negotiated the transfers of 70 detainees to 20 countries, with improved security outcomes.

Ambassador Fried is currently a Weiser Family Distinguished Fellow at the Atlantic Council. He is also on the Board of

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Dan Fried has been married to Olga Karpiw since 1979; they have two children (Hannah and Sophie), and are the besotted grandparents of Ava Helen Fried Hanley.



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Denise Forsthuber is associate director of the Atlantic Council's Future Europe Initiative, where she leads the Council's programming on Central Europe and the Three Seas Initiative. In addition, Denise conducts development operations for the program and is responsible for organizing events and briefings. Denise also manages two visiting fellowships for the Council, the Transatlantic Media Network and Atlanticist Fellowship, as well as the Future Europe Initiative's resident fellows.

Previously, Denise was a program manager and research associate at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington DC, as well as an assistant at the Clements Center for National Security at The University of Texas at Austin. While at The University of Texas, Denise was a Bill Archer Fellow, through which she interned for the former Foreign Policy Initiative in Washington DC, and a Next Generation Scholar where she conducted research on Ukraine. She received her BA in International Relations with honors from The University of Texas and her MA in Security Studies from Georgetown University. In 2018-2019 she was a Penn Kemble Fellow at the National Endowment for Democracy. In addition to her professional responsibilities, Denise has served as a University of Texas student mentor since 2014 and as a volunteer for the National Multiple Sclerosis Society for more than ten years.



### Alena Kudzko

Alena Kudzko is a Director at the GLOBSEC Policy Institute think tank in Bratislava where she oversees policy development work, operations, and research for five Institute programmes – national security, defence, strategic communications, the future of Europe, and technology and society. Her current research focus is concentrated on European and transatlantic relations and security, including

the reform of security institutions and the EU, and migration. Alena is also the project lead for the GLOBSEC European Security Initiative and the GLOBSEC NATO Adaptation Initiative. As part of the broader GLOBSEC team, Alena, moreover, contributes to formulating the vision, crafting the agenda, conducting research, and organizing the annual GLOBSEC Bratislava Forum, the GLOBSEC Tatra Summit, and the GLOBSEC Chateau Bela Conference. Before joining GLOBSEC, she worked at various NGOs and academic institutions in Belarus, Estonia, and Hungary, specializing in the area of foreign relations, democratization, and community development. She further conducted research and project work with civil society organizations on the implementation and strengthening of liberal democratic norms and human rights. Alena graduated with honors and as the Outstanding Academic Achievement Award winner from Central European University in Budapest with a Master's degree in International Relations and European Studies. She previously studied international politics, languages and music at California State University, Bakersfield (as a U.S. State Department Global Undergraduate Fellow), Belarusian State University in Minsk, and the Estonian School of Diplomacy in Tallinn.



### Ambassador Jakub Wiśniewski

Ambassador Wiśniewski is Vice President for Strategy at GLOBSEC. Jakub Wiśniewski is also the former Polish ambassador to OECD (2014- 2016) and head of foreign policy planning at the Polish Foreign Ministry (2010-2014). He holds PhD in political science from the University of Warsaw and MA in international relations from the University of Łódź. He also served as a board member of Polish leading think-tanks

– the Polish Institute of the International Affairs, Center of Eastern Studies, and the Institute of Central-Eastern Europe (2010-2015). As an analyst at the Office of the Committee for European Integration, he was involved in the preparation and negotiation of the Polish accession to the EU. That process encompassed the redefining of Polish ties with external actors (the modification of treaties and agreements and the formulation of the geopolitical shift of the country). He later served as head of policy planning where a central task involved participation in European wide policy debates regarding the development of the European Global Strategy. The discussions revolved around fine-tuning the strategies, vision, and technical instruments of EU foreign policy. Finally, as head of Poland's delegation to the OECD, he participated in discussions that addressed questions concerning Europe's economic and social position in the world and its relations with other Western partners including the United States and Canada. He particularly specialized on the challenges Europe is encountering in the areas of migration, climate change, and the postindustrial transition. He helped shape the EU's status and role within the OECD and connected it to forums such as the G20. As deputy head of Advisory Board of the Eurasia Competitiveness Programme, he further steered the OECD to engage deeper in cooperation with post-soviet countries. In brief, Europe's place in the world and its ambitions have always been at the heart of his professional activity. He is the author of numerous books and research papers on topics ranging from the welfare state and social policy (the European social model in particular) to migration and the future of the EU. And he has edited and authored government reports assessing the impact of the Polish accession to the EU on the country's economy, politics and society. His most recent GLOBSEC report develops ideas emerging from Central Europe regarding prospective EU reforms in the 2019-2023 political cycle.



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