

# Issue brief    A three-pillar strategy for institutional reform in Central and Eastern Europe

Stephen Nix and Megan Tamisiea

*As Europe faces rising authoritarian pressure, hybrid threats, and democratic backsliding, the United States must revitalize and adapt its approach to democracy assistance. To safeguard democratic resilience, the strategy should focus on citizen empowerment, judicial independence, and electoral integrity.*

## Bottom lines up front

- US democracy assistance in Europe must be bolstered and adapted to region-specific challenges, countering external interference from Russia and China while strengthening civic engagement and public trust.
- Supporting independent legal institutions and the rule of law ensures accountability, prevents state capture, and protects democratic norms.
- Protecting political processes—including free, fair, and competitive elections—reinforces pluralism, deters manipulation, and strengthens transatlantic security and stability.

## Introduction: A region undergoing transformation

Since the third wave of democratization<sup>1</sup>—the global surge of democratic transitions beginning in the mid-1970s—Europe has often been regarded as a leader in liberal democracy. In its 2024 Democracy Index, the Economist Intelligence Unit ranks Western Europe as the highest-scoring region worldwide, with a regional average of 8.38—making it the only territory to record a net improvement in democratic perfor-

mance during the latest cycle.<sup>2</sup> However, this snapshot only captures part of Europe’s democratic environment and can be misleading, given the complex challenges confronting other European subregions.

Over the past fifteen years, Europe has endured a “polycrisis”—including the eurozone crisis, the migration crisis, climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Russia-Ukraine war—all of which have strained democratic institutions and weakened public cohesion.<sup>3</sup>

1. Samuel P. Huntington, “Democracy’s Third Wave,” *Journal of Democracy*, 1991, <https://www.ned.org/docs/Samuel-P-Huntington-Democracy-Third-Wave.pdf>.
2. “EIU’s 2024 Democracy Index: Trend of Global Democratic Decline and Strengthening Authoritarianism Continues through 2024,” Economist Intelligence Unit, February 27, 2025, <https://www.eiu.com/n/democracy-index-2024/>.
3. Ieva Česnulaitė, “Citizens’ Assemblies Democratic Responses to Authoritarian Challenges in Central and Eastern Europe,” *DemocracyNext*, November 21, 2024, [www.demnext.org/uploads/Citizens-Assemblies-Democratic-Responses-to-Authoritarian-Challenges-in-Central-and-Eastern-Europe\\_2024-11-20-110352\\_nsha.pdf](https://www.demnext.org/uploads/Citizens-Assemblies-Democratic-Responses-to-Authoritarian-Challenges-in-Central-and-Eastern-Europe_2024-11-20-110352_nsha.pdf).

Europe faces two primary authoritarian adversaries: Russia, which employs election interference, military aggression, and other forms of destabilization, and China, which wields influence through commercial trade deals, loans, and strategic alliances. Populism, polarization, and an eroding public consensus on defending Ukraine further undermine democratic safeguards against authoritarian trends in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>4</sup> Election manipulation, economic coercion, and disinformation campaigns intensify this democratic backsliding. Without increased US support, the integrity of elections and the peaceful transfer of power are at risk, threatening the security and sovereignty of NATO and the European Union (EU).

### **The need for a revitalized, regionalized US democracy assistance approach**

Given these threats, US democracy assistance remains essential for Western security—but it must evolve. It should reflect regional dynamics and address both internal and external pressures, while also going beyond military force to build pathways for multilateral donors, private sector actors, and civil society networks to complement efforts when the United States can only provide limited support. The role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), European Union institutions, transatlantic alliances, and independent media donors will be vital in safeguarding electoral integrity and civil society protections in countries where US influence is limited.

In Eastern Europe, this means combining military aid with soft-power tools, such as electoral assistance, rule of law measures, and civic education support. In Central Europe, these same priorities are crucial for ensuring free and fair elections, safeguarding political competition, and protecting voters.

A revitalized, context-specific plan for democracy assistance is necessary to protect US interests and reinforce European democratic security. Such a plan must prioritize three pillars: people, the rule of law, and political processes. These pillars encompass key objectives such as judicial independence, protection of civil society and journalists, election integrity, and other critical mechanisms for democratic growth.

Supporting democratic development abroad strengthens US security, prosperity, and influence, while also bolstering market diversification, NATO stability, and the United States' status as a global power. To undervalue this soft-power tool is to risk long-term political instability, violence, and economic disparity for both the United States and its European allies.

### **The fight for democracy and sovereignty in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia**

Eastern Europe remains a primary focus of Russia's military aggression. Moscow's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has strained regional resources, distorted democratic processes, and deepened divisions between pro-European and pro-Kremlin leaders. Amidst its violent imperialist policies, Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine applied for EU candidacy in early 2022; the EU granted Moldova and Ukraine candidate status that June<sup>5</sup>—but deferred Georgia's status transition until December 2023—pending democracy-focused reforms.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Ukraine**

Ukraine's military successes against Russia illustrate the connection between democracy and sovereignty. Western donors have provided resources to improve Ukraine's anti-corruption efforts, judicial reforms, municipal support, and public transparency. This assistance has enabled Ukraine to significantly bolster its countermeasures against Russian hybrid tactics, including disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, and direct military action.<sup>7</sup>

Ukraine was granted EU candidate status in June 2022 and has continued implementing policies for future integration with the support of the €50 billion Ukraine Facility (2024-2027).<sup>8</sup> While a presidential election remains contingent upon a negotiated settlement of the war, the nation's ongoing transparency and anti-corruption policies are sustained by both leadership and public support, enabling consensus for sovereignty and democracy.

4. Ibid.

5. "Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood: Ukraine," European Commission, last visited September 10, 2025, [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/european-neighbourhood-policy/countries-region/ukraine\\_en](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/european-neighbourhood-policy/countries-region/ukraine_en); "Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood: Moldova," European Commission, last visited September 10, 2025, [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/european-neighbourhood-policy/countries-region/moldova\\_en](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/european-neighbourhood-policy/countries-region/moldova_en)

6. "Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood: Georgia," European Commission, last visited September 10, 2025, [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/european-neighbourhood-policy/countries-region/georgia\\_en](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/european-neighbourhood-policy/countries-region/georgia_en).

7. Maksym Beznosiuk, "Russian Hybrid Warfare: Ukraine's Success Offers Lessons for Europe," Atlantic Council, June 5, 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russian-hybrid-warfare-europe-should-study-ukraines-unique-experience/>.

8. "Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood: Ukraine."

Ukraine's alignment with Europe is also reflected in public opinion. As of 2025, 54 percent of European citizens polled support providing arms to Ukraine.<sup>9</sup> Europeans generally continue to favor increased military assistance. However, public support for Ukraine has declined because of war fatigue,<sup>10</sup> inconsistent US policy, disinformation, and nationalist positions on foreign aid and migration. It is therefore in the United States' interest to provide consistent support for Ukraine while also encouraging increased European contributions. Doing so will help ensure that Ukraine's sovereignty and democratic institutions are sustained while reducing Europe's dependence on US support and strengthening prospects for long-term assistance.

### Moldova

Moldova remains one of Russia's top destabilization targets, vulnerable to both military escalation and hybrid threats. Democratic backsliding is largely driven by economic insecurity and weakened institutional trust. According to a recent Eurobarometer poll, 46 percent of Moldovans identify inflation and the cost of living as their top concern, and 63 percent say they do not trust the national government.<sup>11</sup> Such vulnerabilities are routinely exploited by Russia through disinformation and vote manipulation.

Moldova's 2024 presidential election highlighted the intersection of Russian influence and domestic corruption. Moldovan authorities allege that approximately \$39 million was transferred from Russia by fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor into thousands of local accounts to fund vote-buying, disinformation campaigns, and bribery of public officials.<sup>12</sup> Despite these efforts, the election showed meaningful progress; election monitoring by the International Republican Institute (IRI) reported voter turnout reaching 1.7 million—a 10 percent increase from 2020.<sup>13</sup> This trend coincided with improvements in voter mobilization,

transparency, and polling oversight, demonstrating the potential for success through the collaboration of US democracy assistance, national governments, and civil society.

Moldova's EU-oriented government has been instrumental in advancing its sovereignty and development as an EU candidate. However, with the fall 2025 parliamentary elections approaching, Russia is escalating efforts to empower oligarchic forces and polarize voters using economic pressures and disinformation campaigns.<sup>14</sup> This situation requires sustained US democracy assistance—particularly in voter education, anti-corruption monitoring, and political party development.

### Georgia

Georgia's EU candidacy was delayed due to signs of democratic regression; the Georgian Dream party has since escalated these trends by moving closer to Moscow—weaponizing the Kremlin's influence through energy dependence and economic ties as well as by using domestic tools for elite capture and political repression. Russia currently occupies 25 percent of Georgian territory, and its hybrid interference tactics increasingly undermine Georgia's sovereignty and European Union integration.<sup>15</sup>

The 2024 elections reflected this shift, marked by voter intimidation, regulatory flaws, and a misuse of state resources that disadvantaged opposition parties. These systemic flaws reinforce state capture and erode trust in democratic institutions. Recent IRI polling found that 54 percent of Georgians believe the country is on the wrong track, alongside a steady decline in the public's belief that ordinary citizens can influence political decisions.<sup>16</sup>

While public disillusionment with the political system is growing, strong support for EU integration persists: approximately two-thirds of Georgians continue to support EU membership, even

9. "In the Face of War and Trump, Taking the Measure of European Public Opinion: 10 Points on Our Exclusive Eurobazooka Survey," Groupe d'Etudes Géopolitiques, March 20, 2025, <https://geopolitique.eu/en/2025/03/20/in-the-face-of-war-and-trump-taking-the-measure-of-european-public-opinion-10-points-on-our-exclusive-eurobazooka-survey/>.
10. "Support for Ukraine Still High among EU Citizens but Some Fall off Apparent among Certain Groups," Eurofound, March 23, 2025, [www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/publications/all/support-ukraine-still-high-among-eu-citizens-some-fall-apparent-among#overview](https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/publications/all/support-ukraine-still-high-among-eu-citizens-some-fall-apparent-among#overview).
11. "Standard Eurobarometer 103," European Union, 2025, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3372>.
12. "Republic of Moldova: Council Lists Seven Individuals and Three Entities for Actions Destabilising the Country," Council of the European Union, press release, July 15, 2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/07/15/republic-of-moldova-council-lists-seven-individuals-and-three-entities-for-actions-destabilising-the-country/>.
13. "IRI Observes Second Round of 2024 Moldovan Presidential Election: High Turnout and Effective Administration Despite Foreign Interference," International Republican Institute, November 4, 2024, <https://www.iri.org/news/iri-observes-second-round-of-2024-moldovan-presidential-election/>.
14. "Russia Continues Efforts to Regain Influence over Moldova," Institute for the Study of War, September 2025, <https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/russia-continues-efforts-to-regain-influence-over-moldova/>.
15. "Russian Influence Operations in the Black Sea Region: Georgia, Moldova, and Romania," Foreign Policy Research Institute, YouTube video, February 19, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BC5dJkDDyxY>.
16. CISR-approved IRI Poll Presentation – Released soon.

at the cost of cutting trade ties with Russia.<sup>17</sup> However, this pro-democracy sentiment is increasingly at odds with the government's efforts to restrict foreign-backed civic engagement. In May 2024, the Georgian Dream party passed a Kremlin-inspired "foreign agents" law, targeting NGOs and media outlets that receive foreign funding. The law labels these groups as entities that serve foreign interests, effectively criminalizing civil-society activity and directly undermining US and EU democracy assistance efforts.<sup>18</sup>

This deliberate restriction of civic space underscores the urgent need for sustained US engagement. To remain effective, democracy assistance must adapt by emphasizing election monitoring, targeted civil society protection, and diplomatic pressure to revoke authoritarian legislation. Applying pressure on Georgia's institutions while empowering civil society groups is not only an opportunity to support a willing, pro-Western society, but also essential to securing Europe's eastern frontier.

### **Competing values and the question of European unity—Poland, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia**

Central Europe is increasingly vulnerable to democratic erosion, driven by both internal fragmentation and escalating Russian interference. The Kremlin has refined its soft-power strategies, targeting the region's political institutions, public trust, and national cohesion through disinformation and narrative manipulation.<sup>19</sup>

#### **Poland**

Poland's democratic growth showcases the balance between security and democracy. While it is a member of the EU and NATO, along with a firm supporter of Ukrainian sovereignty, it has struggled to maintain protection for its independent media, electoral processes, and judiciary.<sup>20</sup> The re-election of the Law and Justice Party (PiS), a right-wing nationalist party, marked a further prioritization of military spending and conserva-

tive migration policies. In the 2025 Eurobarometer polls, only 7 percent of participants stated that they considered threats to democracy as a priority for Poland, while 36 percent said rising prices, inflation, and the cost of living should be a top priority, and 26 percent cited security and defense as a top priority.<sup>21</sup>

In the 2025 presidential election, Russia deployed "Operation Doppelgänger," which involved more than ten thousand coordinated social media bot accounts designed to heighten fears regarding migration and security.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, Russian-influenced media outlets prioritized pro-Russian sentiment, such as that the war represented President Vladimir Putin's ability to lead and serve as a strong politician. While this interference did not impact Poland's election as drastically as Moldova or Georgia, Poland's unity is vital for EU stability. A Eurosceptic Poland is a case that must be monitored and prioritized in democracy assistance efforts, especially amidst falling trust in its national government and a lack of investment in democracy programs.

#### **Hungary**

Hungary has disrupted EU decision-making throughout the Russia-Ukraine war. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán—in power since 2010 and known for his nationalist and Kremlin-friendly policies—has institutionalized democratic backsliding, turning Hungary into the EU's most overtly pro-Russian member state. His administration continues to suppress judicial independence, weaken checks on executive power, and suppress civil society. Orbán has fostered close ties with the Kremlin, echoing Russian anti-liberal narratives and openly challenging EU consensus on sanctions and Ukraine's aid. Hungary now serves as a platform for Moscow's ideological influence, undermining the EU's decision-making process from within.<sup>23</sup>

While Hungary's government isolates itself from the EU, citizens continue to support EU alignment. In the most recent Eurobarometer polls, 69 percent of participants expressed attachment to the EU, and 81 percent expressed attachment to Europe. These pro-European sentiments are further reflec-

17. Ibid.

18. Marc Goedemans, "What Georgia's Foreign Agent Law Means for Its Democracy," Council on Foreign Relations, August 21, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/what-georgias-foreign-agent-law-means-its-democracy>.

19. Carmen Molina Acosta, "Why Are Russian Disinformation Campaigns Citing ICIJ?" International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, July 24, 2024, <https://www.icij.org/investigations/russia-archive/why-are-russian-disinformation-campaigns-citing-icij/>.

20. Zselyke Csaky, "The Difficulties of Restoring Democracy in Poland," Center for European Reform, December 17, 2024, <https://www.cer.eu/insights/difficulties-restoring-democracy-poland>.

21. "Standard Eurobarometer 103."

22. "The Kremlin's Double Game: Russian Attempts to Influence Poland's 2025 Election," GLOBSEC, June 6, 2025, <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/commentaries/kremlins-double-game-russian-attempts-influence-polands-2025-election>.

23. Mike Smeltzer and Alexandra Karppi, "Nations in Transit 2024," Freedom House, 2024, [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/NIT\\_2024\\_Digital\\_Booklet.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/NIT_2024_Digital_Booklet.pdf).

ted in public views towards Ukraine: 73 percent agree with the EU's decision to welcome refugees and asylum seekers displaced by the Russia-Ukraine war, and 63 percent support humanitarian and financial assistance to Ukraine.

While democratic growth is extremely limited due to policies against NGOs and civil society rights, it is necessary to maintain education and political party empowerment to counteract anti-Europe narratives, which indirectly taint information in Poland, Slovakia, Georgia, and other vulnerable democracies. Recent European Parliament elections resulted in Fidesz, Orbán's ruling party, recording its worst performance to date, marked by a shift towards the centrist and pro-European opposition movement Tisza. US democracy assistance must prioritize political parties such as Tisza and related mobilization efforts to prepare for the 2026 Hungarian National Parliament elections, which will both determine Hungary's future role in the EU and its alignment with Russia.

### Romania

Romania has experienced heightened Russian pressures due to instability from the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war. Both have weakened public opinion and eroded trust in government institutions and independent media. Since 2023, Russian information campaigns have targeted economic insecurity—which 40 percent of survey participants identified as Romania's top policy issue—and leveraged the country's anti-colonialist history to portray the West as a colonizer.<sup>24</sup> As early as 2023, these narratives entered presidential campaigns and were amplified by Hungary and Poland. Furthermore, such messaging has encouraged the idea of a potential territorial acquisition in Ukraine if it were defeated. Similar external propaganda efforts are underway in Hungary and Poland.<sup>25</sup>

Russian-backed cyber campaigns interfered in the 2024 elections, amplifying support for pro-Russian candidate Călin Georgescu. Sophisticated disinformation tactics polarized the electorate and eroded public confidence in democratic institutions.<sup>26</sup> Romania's earlier delay to sanction Russia and support Ukraine weakened regional solidarity. However, the recent election of centrist reformer Nicușor Dan signals an enduring commitment among Romanian voters to EU values and

Western alignment that must be supported by the US and its European allies.

### Slovakia

Slovakia, also a member of the EU, has historically maintained steady democratic growth. Recently, however, it has ceded to Russia's influence under Prime Minister Robert Fico. Re-elected on a populist, anti-Ukraine platform, Fico has aligned with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in rejecting EU foreign policy coordination. His government has weakened independent institutions, pressured journalists, and used state mechanisms to consolidate power.<sup>27</sup> Fico's alignment with Moscow's authoritarian practices—including efforts to diminish judicial independence and press freedom—undermines both EU governance standards and NATO's strategic posture on its eastern frontier.

While Slovakia's citizens remain united in their support of the EU and continued security support cooperation against Russia, internal democratic backsliding makes meaningful action increasingly difficult. In Eurobarometer surveys, 65 percent of Slovak participants expressed distrust in the national government. Furthermore, although rising prices, inflation, and the cost of living remain the top domestic concerns—as seen amongst other nations in the region—Slovaks show a stronger desire for peace and stability than for greater economic opportunities.<sup>28</sup>

Slovakia is extremely vulnerable to external influence and Russian interference. As polls show, citizens feel that the nation's security and the continued stability of the EU are in jeopardy. Prioritizing public empowerment for future elections and maintaining the separation of powers will be critical to prevent further democratic decay.

The cases of Eastern and Central Europe highlight the evolving and region-specific threats to democracy across EU and non-EU nations. From external manipulation to internal erosion, each country faces unique challenges shaped by historical legacies, political elites, public sentiment, and geopolitical positioning. However, a common trend persists: democratic backsliding is not only a domestic governance issue but also a regional security concern that directly impacts the EU and

24. "Standard Eurobarometer 103."

25. "Russian Influence Operations in the Black Sea Region."

26. Shota Gvineria, "Targeted Disruption: Russian Interference in the 2024 Elections of Moldova, Romania and Georgia," *Geopolitics* 18 (2025), <https://politicsgeo.com/public/storage/articles/May2025/Shota%20Gvineria%20-%20Russian%20Interference%20in%20the%202024%20Elections%20of%20Moldova,%20Romania%20and%20Georgia%20.pdf>.

27. Katie Randle, "Civil Society and the Fight for Democracy in Slovakia," *Democratic Erosion Consortium*, May 13, 2025, <https://democratic-erosion.org/2025/05/13/civil-society-and-the-fight-for-democracy-in-slovakia/>.

28. "Standard Eurobarometer 103."



NATO. To address these multidimensional threats, US democracy assistance must evolve into a proactive, structured approach that stabilizes democratic institutions before global crises escalate. The following three-pillar strategy—centered on people, the rule of law, and political processes—provides a long-term framework for sustained political engagement and targeted government reform.

### **A revitalized approach to democracy assistance**

US democracy assistance should embrace three pillars: people, the rule of law, and political processes. These pillars can be broken down into thematic priorities—anti-corruption measures, protection of independent media, and strengthening institutional integrity—all of which increase national capacity for democratic reform and resilience.<sup>29</sup>

#### **Fostering people-centered strategies**

Democracy can only be sustained with an informed, engaged, and mobilized citizenry. In the face of Moscow's interference—which exploits economic instability and global propaganda networks—incorporating people-focused objectives is vital to strengthening the EU, NATO, and Europe as a whole.

##### *Application examples*

In Georgia, this strategy would involve expanding legal protections and resources for civil society organizations. Such measures would counteract increasingly repressive policies, including the foreign agents law, and reinforce governance accountability mechanisms. Expanded trade cooperation between the US and Georgia may further leverage diplomatic relations to incentivize greater Western alignment and reduce Russian influence and Chinese economic expansion.

Moldova's economic struggles present opportunities for deeper collaboration between civil society and democratic institutions. US democracy assistance should support citizen mobilization through civic training initiatives, structured government dialogue, and job creation programs, while also enhancing election monitoring, mobilization efforts, and public trust. Prioritizing civic education in low-income areas will help reduce susceptibility to economic coercion in future elections.

In Hungary and Slovakia, the current political climate demands continued support for opposition parties and grassroots media outlets to prepare for upcoming elections. Fidesz's underwhelming performance in recent EU elections signals an opening for opposition gains, yet youth disengagement and

state-controlled media capture under Orbán and Fico make preserving democratic processes increasingly challenging.

Educating and empowering citizens to participate in political processes and democratic initiatives not only strengthens civic engagement but also builds public trust in governance. However, these efforts can succeed only if legal systems remain independent and impartial, ensuring that civic efforts are protected amidst political dysfunctions. Accordingly, US assistance must focus on bolstering the rule of law to institutionalize democratic norms and ensure accountability.

#### **Supporting the rule of law**

Legal institutions are often the first to be dismantled in times of democratic backsliding or conflict. To prevent state capture and the enactment of illiberal laws, the United States must support transparent and independent judicial systems.

##### *Application examples*

Ukraine has prioritized government accountability and anti-corruption measures throughout the war. As the United States provides a large amount of Ukraine's defense assistance, it may be more feasible to further leverage EU financial contributions to expand legal counsel training, strengthen judicial independence, and enhance judicial-vetting programs. Collaboration in this pillar could pair EU funding with US expertise, drawing on resources of the American Bar Association and other professional legal organizations.

Slovakia, Romania, and Moldova are experiencing heightened political vulnerability within their party systems, underscoring the need for judicial independence to safeguard the separation of powers. Comparable to reforms in Ukraine, this would involve legal training for reform-minded judges, prosecutors, and opposition lawmakers. In Moldova and Romania, strengthening the rule of law is essential to prevent oligarchic re-entrenchment in future election results and executive transitions. In Slovakia, such initiatives would counter expanded executive control and complement civil society efforts to monitor corruption and advocate for judicial independence.

Bolstering the rule of law ensures that election outcomes reflect the will of the people and uphold democratic integrity. However, to sustain electoral contestation and fairness, the United States must also invest in protecting democratic processes.

29. This section is inspired by Freedom House's 2024 "Nations in Transit" report, which presents policy recommendations centered around countering Russian interference, corruption, and authoritarian development. Smeltzer and Karppi, "Nations in Transit 2024."

### Safeguarding political processes

Democratic political processes involve free, fair, and competitive elections, supported by robust pluralism. To support future electoral integrity, the risks of manipulation and vote-rigging must be minimized through increased monitoring, civic mobilization, and independent media engagement.

#### *Application examples*

The upcoming parliamentary elections in Moldova and local elections in Georgia will be decisive for democratic consolidation in Eastern Europe. The IRI's work in Moldova—from national polling and electoral monitoring to voter support—was successful in counteracting Russia's vote-buying campaigns. Continued investment in coalition building, electoral risk assessment, and fieldwork in both countries will ensure that the people's voices are truly heard and accurately represented in their political systems. Moldova's upcoming parliamentary elections will be especially vulnerable to interference from Moscow-backed actors seeking to restore control through their previous oligarchic networks.

Romania and Poland require similar assistance to maintain electoral integrity. To maintain pro-European and pro-EU majorities, the United States should expand resources for local, independent media organizations to counter Russian disinformation operations—such as Operation Doppelgänger—and to raise public awareness of foreign propaganda tactics.

### ■ Strategic implications for the United States

A majority of countries in Eastern and Central Europe will hold national elections within the next two years. US democracy assistance must play an active role in supporting electoral integrity through monitoring, mobilization, and civic education. These efforts should be expansive and inclusive, with particular attention to diaspora communities and rural populations who are more vulnerable to disinformation and disenfranchisement. Without free and fair elections—followed by peaceful, democratic transfers of power—states will remain vulnerable to democratic backsliding, Russian influence, and anti-European and anti-Western narratives.

A three-pillar strategy—centered on people, the rule of law, and political processes—provides a pragmatic and effective framework for revitalizing US democracy assistance across Eastern and Central Europe. By investing in democratic resilience, the United States strengthens civic institutions, accountable governance, and electoral credibility, while reinforcing its global leadership at a time of intensifying authoritarian threats. These efforts directly serve US strategic interests by bolstering transatlantic security, expanding economic partnerships, and countering both Russian aggression and China's growing influence. The EU remains central to the West's collective security, and sustained US engagement is essential to preserve the global democratic order and shape the future of international cooperation.

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## About the authors

Stephen Nix is the Senior Director for Europe and Eurasia at the International Republican Institute.

Megan Tamisiea is a Research Assistant with an M.A. in Democracy and Governance from Georgetown University.

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