

Wider Europe

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Summary: Twenty years after the end of the Cold War, Central and Eastern Europe is no longer at the heart of American foreign policy. To some degree, the relationship between the United States and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe has become a victim of its own success. U.S. engagement and support was essential for the success of our democratic transitions after the Iron Curtain fell.

Today, however, there is a growing sense that Central and Eastern Europe is at a political crossroads. The decline of U.S. influence is evident and to some degree it is a logical outcome of the integration of Central and Eastern Europe into the EU. Both public opinion and governments in the region display a growing tendency toward provincialism and short-termism. Absent leadership, these countries could even become an obstacle to future effective U.S.-EU cooperation on global issues, such as energy security, security and defense, and human rights.

Today the goal must be to keep Central and Eastern Europe right as a stable, activist, and Atlanticist part of the broader community. That will require both sides recommitting to and investing in this relationship. But if we do it right, the payoff down the road can be very real.

Why the Obama Administration Should Not Take Central and Eastern Europe for Granted¹

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Twenty years after the end of the Cold War, Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is no longer at the heart of American foreign policy. As the new Obama administration sets its foreign policy priorities, this is one part of the world that Americans have largely stopped worrying about. The successful anchoring and integration of Central and Eastern Europe into NATO and the EU was one of the great foreign policy achievements of last two decades. Many American officials appear to have concluded that the region is “fixed” and that they can move on to other, more pressing strategic issues. Relations have been so close that many on both sides assume that the region’s transatlantic orientation, as well as its stability and prosperity, is eternal. Both the democratic stability of the region and the pro-Atlantic orientation of Central and Eastern European governments have, at times, appeared to be taken for granted in Washington.

To some degree, the relationship between the United States and the countries of our region has become a victim of its own success. Washington played a critical role in anchoring Central and Eastern Europe to the West. U.S. engagement and support was essential for the realization of our democratic transitions after the Iron Curtain fell. Without Washington’s vision and

leadership, it is doubtful that the countries in the region would be in NATO and even the EU today. That strategy was bipartisan. Enlargement to our countries was started under President Clinton and completed under President Bush. Our relations were so close Washington thought we would be allies forever.

That was premature. Indeed, today there is a growing sense that Central and Eastern Europe is at a political crossroads. U.S. influence and popularity are also in decline. Despite our effort and contribution, NATO has become weaker since the countries of Central and Eastern Europe joined it. In many of these countries it is perceived as less and less relevant. As elsewhere, these countries await the results of the EU Commission on the origins of the Russo-Georgian war. But the political impact of that war on the region has already been felt. Many countries were disturbed to see the Atlantic alliance stand by as Russia violated the core principles of the Helsinki Final Act, the Charter of Paris, and the territorial integrity of a country that was a member of NATO’s Partnership for Peace and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council. Perhaps more than any other part of Europe, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe felt threatened by Russia’s move against Georgia.

¹ The views expressed here are the authors’ own and do not necessarily reflect those of the German Marshall Fund

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This is one of several factors that have contributed to growing doubts in the region about NATO. Critics openly question whether NATO would be willing and able to come to the defense of the region in a future crisis with Russia. Europe's dependence on Russian energy also creates concern about the cohesion of the Alliance. President Obama's remark at the recent NATO summit on the need to provide credible defense plans for all Alliance members was welcome, but not enough. The ability of CEE governments to sustain public support at home for contributions to Alliance missions abroad also depends on being able to show that the region's own security concerns are being addressed in NATO and in close cooperation with the United States.

These developments come at a time when America's popularity and influence has fallen in many CEE countries. Public opinion polls, including the German Marshall Fund's own *Transatlantic Trends* survey, show that the region has been afflicted by the collapse in sympathy and support for the United States during the Bush years. The new Obama administration offers a chance to reverse this trend, but it will take time and work on both sides to make up what we have lost. Some leaders in the region have paid a political price for their support of the unpopular war in Iraq. In the future they may be more careful in taking political risks to support the United States.

The decline of U.S. influence is also evident. To some degree it is a logical outcome of the integration of Central and Eastern Europe into the EU. It has become the major factor and institution in the lives of these countries, increasingly in foreign policy as well. Our leaders and officials spend much more time in EU meetings than in consultations with Washington, where they often struggle to attract attention or make our voices heard. To many people, the EU seems more relevant and important today than the link to the United States. The region's deeper integration in the EU is of course welcome and should not necessarily lead to a weakening of the transatlantic relationship. The hope was that integration of Central and Eastern Europe into the EU would actually strengthen the strategic cooperation between Europe and America.

However, there is a danger that instead of being a pro-Atlantic voice in the EU, support for a more global partnership with Washington in the region might wane over time. The region does not have the tradition of assuming a more global role. Both public opinion and governments in the region display a growing

tendency toward provincialism and short-termism. Absent leadership, these countries could even become an obstacle to future effective U.S.-EU cooperation on global issues. Some items on the transatlantic agenda such as climate change do not resonate in the Central and East European publics to the same extent as they do in Western Europe. On the issue of EU enlargement to Turkey -- a matter of crucial importance to the United States -- the countries of the region are no longer a united and dependable group of supporters.

Generational change in the region's political leadership means that the United States is likely to lose many of its traditional interlocutors in the region. Public figures who emerged from the revolutions of 1989 and experienced Washington's key role in securing the region's democratic transition and anchoring it in NATO and the EU are slowly but surely stepping down from the political stage. The current political and economic turmoil and the fallout from the global financial crisis provide additional openings for the forces of ultra-nationalism, extremism, populism, and anti-Semitism. Such dangers, of course, are not confined to Central and Eastern Europe but exist across the continent. But they can be a particular problem in countries with relatively weak democratic institutions and shallow traditions of dialogue. New elites in the region may not only be less idealistic and nostalgic than their predecessors. They may also be more calculating in their support of the United States and more parochial in their world view. Similarly, many of the American leaders and personalities who shaped the relationship with the CEE region are also leaving public life.

And then there is the issue of how to deal with Russia. The hopes in the region that relations with Russia would improve and that Moscow would finally fully accept the sovereignty and independence of these nations after joining NATO and the EU have not been fulfilled. Instead, Russia is seen as being back as a revisionist power pursuing a 19th-century agenda with 21st-century tactics and methods. On a global level, Russia has become, on most issues, a status-quo power. But at a regional level, it increasingly acts as a revisionist one. It challenges the countries' version of their histories. It asserts a privileged position in determining their security choices. It uses overt and covert means of economic warfare, ranging from energy blockades and politically motivated investments to bribery and media manipulation in order to advance its interests and to challenge the transatlantic orientation of Central and East European allies.

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Officially the leaders of the region welcome the “reset” of U.S. relations with Russia. As the countries living closest to Russia, obviously nobody has a greater interest in better relations between Moscow and the West than we do. But there is clearly nervousness and a fear of a deal being done over the heads of the region. Thus far, neither Brussels nor Washington has found an effective answer to Moscow’s efforts to play “divide and rule.” The danger is that Russia’s creeping intimidation and influence-peddling in the region could over time lead to a de facto neutralization of the region. There is a spread of views within the region when it comes to Moscow’s new policies. But there is a shared view that only the United States’ serious commitment to the region can prevent undesirable developments.

Memories in the region are long. People see the difference in their own histories between when the United States stood up for its liberal democratic values and when it did not. The region suffered when the United States succumbed to “realism,” as it did at Yalta. And it benefited when the United States used its power to fight for principle. That was critical during the Cold War and in opening the doors of NATO. Today the concern is, for example, that the United States and the major European powers might embrace the Medvedev plan for a “Concert of Powers” to replace the continent’s existing, value-based security structure.

Leaders in the region want to ensure that too narrow an understanding of interests does not lead to the wrong concessions to Russia. That is why a strong commitment to common liberal democratic values is so important to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe with their fresh memories of totalitarianism and Soviet communism. The transatlantic community is still essential as is the mission to safeguard the values of freedom and democracy as stated in the Washington Treaty. Many in the region are again looking with hope to the United States, and the Obama administration in particular, to restore the Atlantic relationship as a moral compass for their domestic as well as foreign policies.

As policymakers and public intellectuals from the CEE region, we believe the following steps should be taken:

First, the United States should reaffirm its vocation as a European power and make clear that it plans to stay fully engaged on the continent even while it faces pressing challenges in Afghanistan and Pakistan, in the wider Middle East, and in Asia. For their part, leaders and opinion-makers in Central and Eastern

Europe need to work at home as well as in Europe more generally to convince political leaders and society at large to adopt a more global perspective and be prepared to shoulder more responsibility in partnership with the United States.

Second, for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, a key factor in their ability to participate in NATO’s expeditionary missions overseas is the belief that they are secure at home. To this end, the role of NATO as the most important security link between the U.S. and Europe needs strengthening. The alliance remains the continent’s only credible hard-power security guarantee. NATO must reconfirm its core function of collective defense even while it adapts to the new threats of the 21st century. This must start with correcting some self-inflicted wounds from the past. It was a mistake not to commence with proper Article 5 defense planning for new members after NATO was enlarged. NATO needs to make the Alliance’s commitments credible and provide strategic reassurance to all members. This should include contingency planning, prepositioning of forces, equipment, and supplies, and eventually revising the strategic concept. It should also rethink the working of the NATO-Russia Council and return to the practice where NATO member countries enter into dialogue with Moscow with a coordinated position.

When it comes to Russia, the past experience of many Central and East European countries has been that a more determined and principled policy toward Moscow not only strengthens the West’s security but will ultimately lead Moscow to follow a more cooperative policy toward the West. Furthermore, the better protected they feel inside NATO, the easier it will also be for the CEE countries to reach out to engage Moscow on issues of common interest. Cold War-thinking, as well as wishful thinking, about Russia can be dangerous.

The thorniest issue may well be America’s planned missile-defense installations. Here, too, there are divided views in the region, including among the publics. Regardless of the military merits of this scheme and what Washington eventually decides to do, the issue has nevertheless also become -- at least in some countries -- a symbol of America’s credibility and commitment to the region. How it is handled could have a significant impact on their future transatlantic orientation. The small number of interceptor missiles involved cannot be a threat to Russia’s strategic capabilities, and the Kremlin knows this. The countries concerned should decide the future of the program as allies

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and based on the strategic plusses and minuses of the different technical and political configurations. They should not allow the issue to be determined by unfounded Russian opposition. Abandoning the program entirely or involving Russia too deeply in it without consulting Poland or the Czech Republic can undermine the credibility of the United States across the whole region.

Energy security must also become a transatlantic priority as well. Although most of the responsibility for energy security lies within the realm of the EU, the United States also has a role to play. Absent American support, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline would never have been built. Energy security must become an integral part of U.S.-European strategic cooperation. Central and East European countries should lobby harder (and with more unity) inside Europe for diversification of the energy mix, suppliers, and transit routes, as well as for tough legal scrutiny of Russia's abuse of its monopoly and cartel-like power inside the EU. But American political support on this will play a crucial role. Similarly, the United States can play an important role in solidifying further its support for the Nabucco pipeline, particularly in using its security relationship with the main transit country, Turkey.

It is also clear that NATO alone is not enough to secure the CEE region's future. European foreign policy will gain greater coherence and weight in the future. This development should be strongly supported by both the CEE countries and the United States. A common European foreign and defense policy that is open to and geared toward close cooperation with the United States will benefit both sides of the Atlantic. However for this to bring the fullest possible benefits, the United States must engage the EU much more seriously as a strategic partner. We would support regular EU-U.S. summits, for example, and more direct engagement between decision-makers in the periods in between. America and the CEE countries must also jointly push for closer cooperation between NATO and the EU.

We must not neglect the human factor. Our next generations need to get to know each other, too. We have to cherish and protect the multitude of educational, professional, and other networks and friendships that underpin our friendship and alliance. The U.S. visa regime remains an obstacle in this regard. It is absurd that Poland and Romania -- arguably the two biggest and most pro-American states in the CEE region, which are making substantial contributions in Iraq and Afghanistan -- have not yet been brought into the visa waiver program. This

issue will be resolved only if it is made a political priority by the president of the United States.

Finally, 20 years -- and a generation -- have passed since the revolutions of 1989. A new program should be launched to identify and promote those young leaders on both sides of the Atlantic who can carry forward the transatlantic project we have spent the last two decades building in Central and Eastern Europe. A Legacy Fellowship Program would be the ideal vehicle to promote the cause that has served both partners in the relationship so well.

In the 1990s, a large part of getting Europe right was about getting Central and Eastern Europe right. The engagement of the United States was critical to locking in peace and stability from the Baltics to the Black Sea. Today the goal must be to keep Central and Eastern Europe right as a stable, activist, and Atlanticist part of our broader community. That is key to the success of a new renaissance in the Alliance, which the Obama administration has committed itself to work toward, and which we support. That will require both sides recommitting to and investing in this relationship. But if we do it right, the payoff down the road can be very real.

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About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) is a nonpartisan American public policy and grantmaking institution dedicated to promoting greater cooperation and understanding between North America and Europe. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working on transatlantic issues, by convening leaders to discuss the most pressing transatlantic themes, and by examining ways in which transatlantic cooperation can address a variety of global policy challenges. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 through a gift from Germany on the 25th anniversary of the Marshall Plan as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has seven offices in Europe: Berlin, Bratislava, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, and Bucharest.