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After the Summit: What Next for U.S. Democracy Support in Central and Eastern Europe?

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Introduction

Nicolas Bouchet and Joerg Forbrig

The administration of President Joe Biden has made the revival of democracy at home and globally a centerpiece of the United States' domestic and foreign policy. This builds on a stronger-than-ever acknowledgement in Washington that democracy is in distress the world over. In the United States, democracy is challenged by deepening political polarization and social inequality, declining trust in government, broadening disenfranchisement and abuses of fundamental rights, and growing disinformation and political violence. Globally, older and newer democracies face democratic backsliding; political populism and extremism; social upheaval; attacks on political, media, and civic figures; spreading corruption; and meddling by authoritarian powers in politics, elections, media, and societies. As a result, the democratic promise to respect and benefit all citizens has been severely damaged, authoritarian narratives have become powerful, and the worldwide community of democracies has become decreasingly able to confront global challenges—from rising autocratic powers to conflicts and terrorism to migration and climate change. A concerted effort on their part to turn this tide back in favor of democracy is urgently needed.

In aiming to spark and spearhead this effort, the Biden administration has made a global Summit for Democracy its flagship initiative. On December 9 and 10, 2021, the summit will convene political leaders, civil society, and the private sector from the world's democracies to discuss possible joint and individual action to reenergize democratic principles and practices. This initiative will zoom in on three vital areas: strengthening and defending democracy against authoritarianism, the fight against corruption, and respect for human rights. At the summit, the United

States is expected to announce new initiatives for supporting free media, combatting corruption, democratic reforms, civic technology, and electoral integrity. Its democratic partners worldwide are expected to follow suite with commitments of their own. Following the summit, a “year of action” will ensue with continued consultation, coordination, and practical work by different combinations of governmental and non-governmental partners before a second summit at the end of 2022 reconvenes to assess the progress made.

While designed to be a global initiative, this U.S.-led effort at democratic revival will need to address varying mixes of challenges in different world regions. The United States will have to make strategic choices as to where bolstering democratic governance and open societies is most urgently needed and, at the same time, promises most substantial results. First, as the Biden administration acknowledges, a strong focus needs to be on the older democracies of Western Europe and North America. Their democratic functioning and standing has been badly bruised in the last years, and these have to be renewed if democracy is to revive elsewhere in the world. Recharging democracy in the old West is key if the global quest for democracy is to succeed.

The Importance of Central and Eastern Europe

Central and Eastern Europe is one region that is strategically important for a democratic revival the world over—and for the United States in general. Since the end of the Cold war, the eastern half of Europe has seen remarkable progress in democratic transformation and integration with European and transatlantic

institutions. Over the last decade, however, the democratic momentum has weakened across the region and reversed in some cases. Central Europe, once the vanguard of reform toward liberal democracy, has seen substantial backsliding, with democratic institutions hollowed out, the rule of law undermined, and spaces for independent media and civil society shrinking. In the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, past and present conflicts combined with unclear prospects for Euro-Atlantic integration have long hampered full democratic transformation. Authoritarianism has crept back in, facilitated by disappointment with democratic reforms and promoted by external autocratic powers—primarily Russia but increasingly also China—that view the region as an arena of competition in which to challenge the democratic West.

If in Central and Eastern Europe, decades of democratic reform and achievement can be completely undone, this will send a fatal signal to democrats across the globe.

Reversing this regional dynamic must be a priority for the United States and for the global community of democracies for several reasons. First, if in Central and Eastern Europe, decades of democratic reform and achievement can be completely undone, this will send a fatal signal to democrats across the globe. The world's democratically minded citizens and leaders will be discouraged, while skeptics and autocrats will feel vindicated. Second, if a democratic vacuum is allowed to open in Central and Eastern Europe, authoritarian powers will seize the opportunity to expand their influence. The region will once again become a hotbed of instability and stagnation, conflict and great-power competition that it has long been in its history. Third, democratic decline and authoritarian meddling, instability and insecurity will not be limited to Central and Eastern Europe but will spill over westward. The European and transatlantic

democratic community is already struggling with the fallout from the regional downward spiral, including waning political cohesion and worsening security. Stopping these trends in the region will require a full democratic renewal and a long-term push for integration for those of its countries that are still outside of Euro-Atlantic structures.

This importance of Central and Eastern Europe for the global revival of democracy is clearly reflected in the regional perspectives brought together in this paper. Civic leaders and policy experts from across the breadth of the region present the expectations in their respective countries of what the United States can do to support democracy better there and of the Summit for Democracy process. Their contributions, while rooted in the specific realities of each country, highlight overarching challenges facing the region. They also outline how the United States and other international partners can address these through diplomacy, engagement, and democracy assistance, as well as how the Summit for Democracy and the subsequent year of action can have an impact.

The Role of the United States

The contributors to this paper signal the urgent need for a shift in U.S. policy toward Central and Eastern Europe. Over the past decade and across the region, the United States has been perceived as increasingly disengaged, inattentive to rising challenges to democracy, and overly security-focused. Consequently, hopes are high that it will become more involved again in Europe's eastern half, and that it will put in practice a greater emphasis on democracy as central to the region's broader development and security. The United States partnerships with Central and Eastern Europe's governments should thus be conditioned again on their full commitment to democracy and the rule of law, broad citizen participation, the unhindered involvement of civil society, and the safeguarding of diverse and independent media. Those perpetrating state capture and high-level corruption in the region must be shunned by Washington, while abuses of state

power need to be sanctioned, elections safeguarded, and full (re)democratization made a clear prerequisite for U.S. partnership with individual governments.

In addition to this general setting of democracy at the heart of U.S. regional policy, there are expectations across Central and Eastern Europe for actions in specific policy areas. These include assistance with reforms of justice and law-enforcement systems, and capacity building in security sectors to avert an increasing number and variety of threats. Washington should employ its economic muscle, through trade agreements and investment in strategic industries to incentivize democratic performers, and use its investigative and sanctions muscle to punish those that undermine democracy and security in the region. The management and eventual resolution of the many conflicts across the region, and the different necessary reconciliation processes, will equally require stronger U.S. engagement. Such renewed U.S. involvement in Central and Eastern Europe is to be accompanied by strong coordination with the European Union and NATO whose doors need to remain open to any country wishing and qualifying to accede Euro-Atlantic structures.

The Need for U.S. and International Democracy Support

This adjustment of the United States policy toward Central and Eastern Europe needs to be accompanied by robust democracy assistance there—by itself and from its European partners too. The contributors to this paper point to a wide range of, often shared, issues that will require generous and long-term investment. The integrity of elections needs to be enhanced, through supporting election commissions, close monitoring of polls, parallel vote counts, and voter education. Democratic governance broadly needs to be bolstered, through independent watchdogs scrutinizing political decision-making and public budgets. Related to that is support for anti-corruption initiatives by civil society and investigations by independent media. The media field broadly, which is shrinking in much of the

region, needs systematic development to assert independence and pluralism of coverage, counter state propaganda, and offset disinformation from domestic and international sources. Key civil society organizations and networks, covering a broadest possible range of citizen concerns, require stabilization and expansion. The participation of citizens-at-large in public affairs needs to be boosted, especially that of young people and women. Civic education, in formal and non-formal contexts, needs to be reestablished more fully. And continued efforts by civil society at large are necessary to adjust in the short and long term to the changing environment created by the coronavirus pandemic.

This adjustment of the United States policy toward Central and Eastern Europe needs to be accompanied by robust democracy assistance there.

While these are all areas that are of equal importance across Central and Eastern Europe, some issues apply variously to individual countries of the region. In the many conflict and post-conflict zones of the region, civic efforts at crisis management, humanitarian support, and reconciliation remain an urgent necessity. The fallout from ever-greater repression by authoritarian regimes against civil society, independent media, and ordinary citizens requires large-scale assistance, including through relocation and rehabilitation programs for victimized individuals and groups. Economic opportunities for citizens, marginalized groups and regions, startups and small business need support. The systematic development of the next generation of political and civic leadership is necessary. Across all these areas, the potential of digital technologies needs to be tapped and cyber security needs to be boosted.

In this context, some of the underlying assumptions about democracy assistance need to be reconsidered by the United States and its European partners

if this is to be successful. More than has been the case to date, they need to acknowledge that sustainable democracy results from long-term processes of social and political changes that need to be continuously and comprehensively nurtured. Assistance needs to cast its net across the broadest possible range of democratic actors in all segments of society. Within such an encompassing and continuous approach, some instruments are particularly important. One is rapid-response mechanisms to react to abrupt changes and match swift and short-term dynamics in politics, society, and security. Another is core funding to key independent media and investigative outlets, civil society structures, and human rights and humanitarian organizations. Most restrictive environments, which are expanding in Central and Eastern Europe, require highly discrete and flexible funding mechanisms, security measures for organizations and individuals, and emergency support during repressive phases. Diaspora-based civil society and independent media, as well as people-to-people contacts and conduits need systematic development when it comes to those countries of the region where authoritarian regimes make every effort to eradicate independent civil society and media. Intra-regional networking and peer exchanges of experiences by democratic actors from Central and Eastern must be expanded, while coordination and concertation among U.S. and European, public and private donors needs to be strengthened. Last but not least, the international democratic community should assert and advocate clearly, at home and abroad, the right and obligation to assist democratic actors inside any country of Central and Eastern Europe, and indeed globally.

The Summit for Democracy—and After

As per the authors of this paper, the Summit for Democracy as a global initiative is overwhelmingly welcomed in Central and Eastern Europe. At a minimum, it provides an international platform to raise the many issues that hamper the region's development, democracy, and security. Among those high-

lighted are festering conflicts in Eastern Europe and unresolved disputes in the Western Balkans, malign influences by Russia, pervasive corruption, weakness of state institutions and political processes, and limitations—to differing degrees—to public and independent media, the rule of law, and civil society. In the face of these challenges, the Summit for Democracy is expected to promote stronger government adherence to international standards, empower democratic leaders from the region, and involve local civil society and media. This hope is explicitly shared by the democratic publics of the countries, including in the region Azerbaijan, Belarus, Hungary, and Russia, whose non-democratic governments have not been invited to the summit. When it comes to these countries—and also ones that, like Poland and Serbia, might also not have been invited due to their deteriorating situation—the summit process from this December till the end of 2022 offer an opportunity for domestic civil society and international partners to keep a brighter spotlight on their governments' behavior.

The Summit for Democracy as a global initiative is overwhelmingly welcomed in Central and Eastern Europe.

Expectations in Central and Eastern Europe go further, however. Hopes across the region are that the Summit for Democracy will lead to a stronger multilateral effort to counter illiberal and authoritarian tendencies. It is hoped the summit will see all participating governments set clear commitments for improving democracy at home but also supporting it abroad, to be followed by communicating these clearly to the publics in individual countries, providing for close monitoring of national performance, and setting foreign policy and conditioning international aid accordingly. A special initiative to address corruption and kleptocracy in Central and Eastern Europe would be very welcome, starting with a goal-oriented dialogue between the region as the origin of illicit financial flows and Western countries

as their destination. Further specific proposals from the region include the drafting of national programs for democratic consolidation, government pledges to support civil society, and coordinating mechanisms to counter the malicious involvement of Russia and other authoritarian powers. In so doing, the Summit for Democracy can link with and build upon existing formats for regional cooperation, at the level of governments and non-state actors.

Central and Eastern Europe clearly hopes that the Summit for Democracy will open an era of democratic revival. Along with this, there is a strong desire across the region to see the United States fully reengage

with this part of the world in foreign policy, democracy assistance, and security support alike. Renewed attention and aid from the United States, however, will only succeed if its partners in the region and in the West make matching efforts. Across Central and Eastern Europe, majorities of citizens remain hopeful and engaged to see democracy in their countries succeed. Further west, the European Union has also come to signal a stronger interest and readiness to help democracy among its vulnerable members and neighbors. This bodes well for the prospects of the tide once again turning in favor of democracy, in Central and Eastern Europe and the world over.

Albania

Gjergj Erebara

On Short-term U.S. Support

Looking back, the activist approach of the Obama administration, and especially that of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, is missed. At that time, human rights were the main topic of the United States' diplomacy toward Albania, and consequently it went after corruption in the country, which is like a weapon of mass destruction for human rights. Civil society was encouraged and Albania made impressive progress in some directions. Right activists were vocal and the country faced up for the first time to the issue of LGBT rights. Roma and Egyptian minorities were more present in the media and their concerns were heard more.

The United States does not need to spend money to stand up for human rights—either the best known ones, such as LGBT rights and freedom of speech, or the less known ones, such as property rights or the right for private life—although this may sometimes hurt some U.S. corporate interests. What people in Albania and in the Balkans need most is the moral authority of the largest and oldest democracy in the world speaking out over human rights. This helps to contain authoritarian tendencies and to fight corruption in the region.

The last several years have shown that communism in Eastern Europe has had lasting consequences when it comes to people's mindset. Communism ruled through a series of conspiracy theories spread with propaganda and disinformation techniques for almost half a century, such as creating the perception of an invisible enemy that should be uncovered. This might help to explain why people in the Central and Eastern Europe are today more prone to believe conspiracy theories, more impacted by anti-vaccine idiocies, and

easier targets for misinformation or disinformation campaigns. That means more is needed in Albania and other countries with a similar background in terms of democratic education. Even the most basic ideas of liberal democracy, such as check and balances in the government structure are somehow foreign to many of the people of the region and that is a major impediment in building democratic societies.

In the 1990s, donor money helped publish major international authors for the first time in Albanian, but one consequence of the assistance void in the decade that followed led to the book market being flooded with conspiracy theories, among other things. Now in the age of the Internet, conspiracy theories, folk nationalism, or identity politics in general have found an open field in the country. One area in which U.S. assistance could have an impact is in empowering public libraries to help the fight against misinformation and disinformation and for democratic education.

On Medium-term U.S. Support

Assistance for democratic progress is a good thing but it is not exactly helping in Albania or the region, and the money is not always well spent. In that context, a general rethinking of assistance is needed. First, aid that is channeled through state bodies, such as technical assistance or development programs, often ends up mired in local corrupt power structures, fueling corruption instead of fighting it. Politicians are able to push for appointing their preferred persons in key roles in projects financed by assistance grants or development loans, while donors often see this as necessary to secure better access and collaboration. There is not much value from such programs.

The civil society that is “created” in Albania by this kind of donor assistance often is not genuine, with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that exist only on paper. And, just like there is corruption in politics and in the private sector, there is corruption in the non-profit sector. In fact, impunity, corruption, and even outright theft are probably higher in the non-profit sector, going unpunished because donors prefer not to file charges with local prosecutors. In this context, the spending of assistance funds by the United States and other donors is still needed, but there has to be a reckoning that the way of this is done determines whether assistance helps to fight for or against democracy. What is needed is better oversight and control of the way aid is provided and at the same time more financial transparency from NGOs. This is a delicate matter that should be addressed gradually but there is no reason why any financial data should be kept almost secret from public scrutiny when it comes to NGOs financed by donor money.

Generally, international assistance to NGOs in Albania tends to be carried out in two separate ways. First, helping activists protesting against injustices, especially those committed by the government. Second, trying to change things from the inside with assistance delivered to government institutions and also to NGOs that are obliged to conform with these institutions. For example, supporting training programs in human rights for police officers is a good thing, but it can also mean that an NGO carrying out such training would need to convince police chiefs to send their officers, and thus the NGO could be less prone to protest against police actions because for fear of losing access. In its assistance to Albania, the United States needs to acknowledge that today in the country there is a greater need for supporting activism and those protesting against the shortcoming of democracy than for attempting to change things from inside.

On the Summit for Democracy

Overall, standing up or being vocal about human rights is a tool that can be used to hold governments into account and to empower local activists. If the Summit for Democracy provides a platform for pro-democracy forces to do so more comprehensively and with a higher profile, not only in December but over the next 12 months, then it will be a welcome initiative, including in countries like Albania that suffer from a range of human rights and democracy challenges.

But, beyond this, it is not clear at this point how much can be expected from the summit for such countries. It may provide some renewed impetus to efforts to measure progress on the commitments that government make on democratization, but to a great extent periodic evaluations of the democratic standing of countries is being done quite well by the likes of Freedom House or the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index, which garner already a lot of attention for their findings. At most, the summit process could bring greater attention to the question of poor performance in such rankings on the part of governments, hopefully stirring them to take some action in the next year to improve things.

Another policy consequence of the summit might be a greater emphasis by major donor countries like the United States on conditioning aid on progress in measurable democratic performance by recipient countries. However, this could prove to have only limited impact since it is most probable that aspiring autocrats around the world, including in Central and Eastern Europe, will make the decision that they are better off foregoing U.S. or other aid conditioned in this fashion, especially as they increasingly have access to other sources of financial support from countries that have no interest in the democratic standing of their partners.

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Armenia

Isabella Sargsyan

On Short-term U.S. Support

One year after the devastating second Karabakh war that took the life of more than 4,000 young men—mostly 18-20-year-old soldiers—and left behind thousands of displaced people and ruined houses, Armenia is facing an unprecedented security crisis. The Russia-brokered trilateral agreement stopped the violence but did not resolve the conflict. There is still an atmosphere of mistrust, deadly incidents are happening regularly, and Azerbaijani military forces are crossing into sovereign Armenian territory, blocking roads and cutting the civilian population of several villages from vital services. At the time of writing, the Azerbaijani military had advanced into Armenia proper, with several Armenian servicemen killed and dozens captured.

The war and its outcomes have sharpened the existing internal political crisis and polarization within society in Armenia. Before the Velvet Revolution of 2018, Armenia was governed for more than 20 years by the corrupt and highly authoritarian Republican Party governments of Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan. According to some, the revolution was a reaction to the aggressive consolidation of power by the corrupt and unpopular regime following the constitutional referendum of 2015. Following the revolution, a new parliament and government took office after free and fair elections. Armenians clearly expressed their will not to have representatives of the former regime in office not only through mass protests but also through the ballot box.

Though Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's government took minor steps to reform the country, with support from the United States, such as the creation of the new Patrol Police and Anti-Corruption Council, it

has failed to deliver promised reforms in the judiciary, good governance, and other vital areas for democratic development. The coronavirus pandemic was not managed properly either, with Armenia among the countries with the lowest level of vaccination and the highest death toll. The war has shaken public support to the government and strengthened Kocharyan and his allies. Nevertheless, in the early parliamentary elections in June 2021, Pashinyan's Civil Contract party won just under 54 percent of the vote and secured a majority in parliament. Kocharyan's "Armenia" alliance and Sargsyan's "I have Honor" alliance were far behind but they are in parliament, which raises serious concerns about the prospects for reforms. Meanwhile, the ongoing tensions at the border as well as the nontransparent and often secret developments around the delimitation of borders and the negotiations with Azerbaijan provide a fertile soil for nationalist sentiments to grow.

The situation in Armenia is so complicated—with the postwar crisis, the security and sovereignty challenges, and the overall shoring of the democratic agenda in the country—that there is very likely no single short-term step that the United States could take to improve it. However, its support to democratic institutions, resilient civil society, and independent media remains an important and urgent need given the malfunctioning institutions, lack of trust toward internal and external actors, and unclear prospects in regional security.

In the short term, Armenia's civil society organizations (CSOs) would benefit from U.S. institutions offering more flexible and responsive non-thematic rapid-funding mechanisms on a rolling basis. Since the situation in the country is very ambiguous, the

priorities of local CSOS can change overnight and a top-down approach to support is not as effective as having a pool of money available at short notice for projects or intervention ideas emanating from the ground. Such grants might help provide emergency humanitarian assistance to the villages in Syunik region that are cut off from Armenia (for example, ensuring children have access to education), help civil society monitor the government's agenda of constitutional reform in terms of transparency, participation, and outreach, or help minority-rights advocacy.

On Medium-term U.S. Support

In the medium term, consistent and locally tailored—that is, designed in close cooperation with local institutions and civil society—support to the planned reforms in the justice and law-enforcement sectors with a focus on human rights will be beneficial for the country. The U.S. Agency for International Development recently announced a five-year multimillion dollar project to support rule-of-law reforms. This is welcome but it will be important that the U.S.-based or other organizations that are selected to implement the project tap local expertise and previous experience.

A recent donor coordination meeting in Armenia highlighted the need for core funding to the independent media. The priorities that media representatives identify for their work are fighting disinformation, fact-checking, and enlarging their audience. There are several short-term and longer-term support projects available to media outlets, but such projects without core or institutional support are not very effective. In a country where most outlets are funded by political actors and where the advertising market is tiny, the independent, pro-democracy media have little chance to compete without assistance through core funding. Another area where core funding is key is the policy and advocacy work of CSOs since this requires them to be able to pursue longer-term campaigns, and to be flexible to adapt to changing realities and new challenges. It is almost impossible for most of

the CSOs working on advocating policy reforms in Armenia—through monitoring, analysis, and advocacy—to achieve sustainable results within short-term, non-flexible projects.

On the Summit for Democracy

In 2018, Pashinyan's government came to power following a democratic revolution and free elections, but today there are clear indications that Armenia is regressing on democratic development and the protection of human rights, including as a result of the Second Karabakh war. Following his victory in the snap elections earlier this, Pashinyan used worrying rhetoric, speaking of a “steel mandate” that would replace the “velvet” one to “establish the dictatorship of law and justice in Armenia.” The Summit for Democracy could raise some of the recently observed democracy and human rights shortcomings in Armenia, providing an additional tool to the country's civil society to keep the government accountable for its commitments.

Free speech is a particular area of concern that such an international initiative could help address. In March, the parliament adopted amendments to the Civil Code increasing the maximum fines for defamation. There have been several cases of individuals being called to speak to the police or put on trial for posting negative comments about Pashinyan or allegedly calling for violence against him. In October, a criminal case was initiated against the activist Sashik Sultanyan for highlighting violations of the rights of Yezidi people in Armenia. He was charged under the Criminal Code's article on the incitement of national, racial, or religious hatred. Further amendments to the Civil Code and to the Law on Mass Media have been initiated in the parliament. The latter amendments would prohibit the media from using “non-identified sources” as part of their journalism, which are defined as “a domain registered on the Internet, a web hosting site, or an account or channel on a website or application, whose owner identification information is hidden from the reader.” The ultimate aim may be altogether blocking channels such as Telegram.

The summit and its follow-up would be good venue for reinforcing the message to Armenia's government about adhering to international standards in freedom of expression, media, and freedom of religion, since the authorities have taken the path of criminalization of what they decide to be hate speech. The Sultanyan case could be highlighted through the summit process by U.S. and other international participants. The summit process could also

be an important platform to raise postwar issues—which have previously been communicated to the U.S. embassy—such as the release of prisoners of war, the humanitarian situation, and the fate of Armenian cultural-spiritual heritage under Azerbaijani control in Nagorno-Karabakh.

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Azerbaijan

Rusif Huseynov

On Short-term U.S. Support

The fundamental problems regarding democracy in Azerbaijan cannot be solved in the short term. Yet, the United States, by using its contacts with the Azerbaijani authorities, can address the institutional development of civil society in the country and promote an inclusive environment in which civil society organizations (CSOs) could thrive. It can start by intensifying its efforts to support changing the legislation that de facto restricts activities in the civic sector. Even if the domestic political system puts serious constraints on the activities of CSOs, there is still room for their development, which should be clearly defined and targeted by U.S. policies. For example, the United States could restore the activities of the joint commission with Azerbaijan to support the maintenance of political liberties, the independence of media organizations, and freedom of speech. At the same time, it could encourage Azerbaijan to embark on a gradual liberalization of certain spheres of domestic politics that would not have serious political consequences for the incumbent government and strengthen the country's international standing. In later stages, with more active U.S. diplomatic engagement, the achievements of this practice could be replicated in other policy areas.

Currently, Azerbaijani civil society is not well-organized due to several reasons, and it has a mountain to climb to have a say in shaping the democratic future of the country. It is structurally weak and divided as different groups pursue their narrow interests at the expense of wider coordination with others. As a result, the lack of will to focus joint efforts on the same target, especially in the context of the absence of support from outside the country, hampers the ability of civil

society to hold the government to account and influence its calculations on a broader democratic opening. When the United States considers supporting CSOs in Azerbaijan, it also should make sure that its efforts are not directed at only those that deal with human rights issues but also ones fighting for ecological, gender, and other crucial matters.

Against this background of institutional problems, what Azerbaijan's civil society lacks most is the technical capabilities to operate in a severely restrictive environment. To that end, bodies such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) can help the country's CSOs by supporting media platforms and civil society activists through capacity-building training in technical areas such as digital media production and fact checking. They can also engage with the government in this regard by organizing roundtable meetings featuring officials, civil society activists, and opposition representatives as well as international experts offering relevant practices from developed and democratizing countries. The United States could also, through USAID, discuss with the government certain changes to NGO legislation.

On Medium-term U.S. Support

In the medium term, the United States' approach to democratization and strengthening civil society in Azerbaijan should be changed. Washington should avoid a narrow focus on human rights that makes it difficult to engage the government in a constructive way and shift to a broader emphasis on inclusive reforms and the institutionalization of CSOs. Over the next three years, certain steps could be taken in this direction in the context of the run-up to the presiden-

tial, parliamentary, and municipal elections scheduled for 2025. At the same time, the United States' engagement with Azerbaijan's government over this period should take into account the fact that the elections will be held against the backdrop of geopolitically crucial events, such as the possible end or extension of the presence of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh, that may influence electoral processes in the country.

When the elections near, the United States can signal its readiness to support the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe mission in Azerbaijan, and especially the activities of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. Through diplomatic channels, Washington can encourage the government to create an inclusive discussion platform that brings together officials, political parties, civil society representatives, and local and international experts to evaluate the shortcomings in conduct of the elections and lessons learnt during the process.

Moreover, the United States should target its assistance to Azerbaijan in the coming years at the preparation of the electoral commission, media organizations, CSOs, and political parties for the elections. U.S. institutions specialized in different election-related fields can share their experience with the authorities and other actors in the country. The United States can further contribute to improving the context for the coming elections through offering resources for the education of Azerbaijan's population in electoral matters. There are CSOs in the country trying to deal with this issue but their lack of financial, technical, and professional expertise, alongside the government's negligence, prevents them from having much impact. The United States could encourage the government to work on joint projects in this regard that would have positive effects on electoral processes in the country.

On the Summit for Democracy

The Summit of Democracy in December is a good opportunity to keep the core topics on the agenda—defending against authoritarianism, fighting corrup-

tion, and human rights—for a large group of states, especially in the context of the decreasing appeal of democracy in the newly emerging world order. It will surely give CSOs in different countries a chance to voice their ideas about the democratic situation in their country and to call for more democratic openings in the near future.

Azerbaijan has not been invited to the summit but this does not mean that the government will totally ignore its relevance for regional and international affairs. The discussion of democratic principles in such a large venue has the potential for creating new discourses that it will have to take into account in its domestic and external behavior. Domestic CSOs can use this moment to raise awareness about Azerbaijan lagging behind other countries in democratization and to put forward certain proposals to improve the situation. Whether this would have a significant impact on the democratic situation in the country would remain to be seen, however.

As a multilateral process over the next year, it is unclear how the two Summits for Democracy might intersect existing regional dynamics. It could, for example, lead to a divide between those countries invited and those not. The proposed 3+3 platform—including the three South Caucasus countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia as well as Iran, Russia, and Turkey—is a hot topic in the region when it comes to multilateralism. Democracy is clearly not the priority for this framework, which—if it materializes—will leave the United States and the EU further out of regional trends. Therefore, the latter should look for ways to reactivate their efforts in the region (perhaps even by seeking join the 3+3 platform) and the “year of action” between the two summits could be one way to do so while bringing a democracy focus to the conversation.

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Belarus

Katsiaryna Shmatsina

On Short-term U.S. Support

Joe Biden's presidency and the growing expressions of U.S. support to the Belarusian democracy movement have been met with enthusiasm by the latter. During past year, the moves in Washington to introduce a new Belarus Democracy Act, to establish a bipartisan Friends of Belarus caucus in Congress, and to host Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya have been the most visible steps toward supporting the cause of democracy in Belarus. At the same time, the democratic forces understand the limits of Washington's willingness to engage with resolving the crisis. Biden's summit meeting with President Vladimir Putin in Geneva, where the country was mentioned just briefly among other discussion points, was indicative of rhetorical rather than practical support by the United States.

The survival of Alexander Lukashenka's regime has been secured with Russia's political and economic support. And the weaker the regime is, the more receptive it becomes to the Kremlin's requests. Thus, Moscow benefits from the crisis on the EU border artificially created by Lukashenka—this gives it a chance to see how NATO members react to a hybrid attack without its direct interference. Russia has sent nuclear-capable strategic bombers to patrol the Belarusian airspace as a sign of support to its ally. The two governments have also agreed on establishing a "training center" in Hrodna, raising concerns as to how this facility hosting Russian air and air defense forces could be used. More recently, U.S. intelligence agencies have reportedly suggested Russia could be planning an invasion of Ukraine partially launched from Belarusian territory. All in all, the prolonged crisis in the country makes Belarus a major trouble-maker in the region.

With a short-term perspective, the United States should include Belarus on the agenda in its diplomatic talks with Russia, with the aim of increasing the costs of the Kremlin's support to Lukashenka. Throughout, in its dealing with Moscow Washington should back the long-standing demands of the Belarusian democratic forces: a national dialogue, free and fair presidential elections, and the release of political prisoners. A successful outcome for them is an unacceptable option for the Kremlin but, at the same time, it attempting to maintain the status quo or to replace Lukashenka by some puppet president would not bring a sustainable solution to the crisis. The Russian regime should remember that Belarusians mobilized to protest against the possible loss of sovereignty when it initiated new Union State integration talks in 2019.

U.S. assistance policy for the next year should focus on the immediate preservation of the civil society and individual enduring ongoing severe repression. Most of the civic initiatives on the ground are on hold, given that the most visible activists have been put in prison or forced to flee the country, and that the regime sees any independent grassroots initiative as a threat that could lead to protests. The diaspora and those activists who now have to operate from exile are the main driving force of civil society. In this context, U.S. assistance programs should entail more emergency, flexible financial and practical support for the diverse individuals and groups who have had to leave the country, including nonprofits and media but also fellowships for scholars and experts driven out by repression. Building networks of Belarusian diasporas and supporting existing programs that help to integrate the activists in forced exile is another urgent priority.

On Medium-term U.S. Support

The United States' policy toward Belarus in the medium term will have to fit which of the possible outcomes of the crisis in the country becomes reality. A democratic transition seems the most elusive one today but, should a new government representing the democratic forces take office, it will quickly reestablish diplomatic ties and Belarus would become a stakeholder in the international liberal order. In that case, the United States and other Western countries would need to offer the new government a wide range of diplomatic and economic support for the necessary reforms it would have to implement. In the gloomier and likelier scenario in which the Lukashenka regime remains in place, or in one in which Russia increases its grip over Belarus, the United States' policy should be to maintain its hard stance and disregard any overtures from Minsk about a new normalization in relations or calls to reestablish dialogue with the regime. Washington should view Belarus not only through the lens of support for democratic values but also through the one that sees the authoritarian regime is an easy target for Russia and also for China. Some sources have suggested that at one point, as the crisis in Belarus developed, Beijing asked Moscow to intervene to stabilize the situation because the protests undermined China's economic interests in the country.

The medium-term U.S. assistance policy should entail flexible options for supporting Belarusian civil society, given that multiple individuals and initiatives will have to keep operating outside the country for some time and that any return to Belarus could be very difficult. It is important for Washington to act with strategic patience and not to expect rapid results, though, and also to avoid the concentration of grants in the hands of a small number of actors but rather support a broad range of civic initiatives. Beyond support for civil society organizations and independent media, the United States should also consider providing assistance for research on Belarus with engagement of Belarusian scholars. Previously,

the country received marginal attention from U.S. research centers and think tanks, which contributed to creating the skewed vision that Belarusians were content with the status quo and not seeking to get rid of authoritarian rule, disregarding the long-standing demand on the ground for democratic governance. This is why the post-electoral crisis that began in 2020 came as surprise to the United States and the rest of the international community.

On the Summit for Democracy

Discussing Belarus at the Summit for Democracy would be a further symbolic expression of solidarity with its democratic actors, after several such moves in the United States and Europe over the last year. Hearings at the U.S. Helsinki Commission, discussions at U.S. think tanks, and op-eds in major U.S. media have also been well perceived by Belarusian society and independent media. All these public manifestations give hope that the crisis in the country will receive more attention from the international community.

As for the follow-up to the Summit, the next practical steps could support and endorse networks between Belarusian civil society organizations, diaspora actors, and their foreign counterparts. One important step for the future resilience of Belarus would be to include Belarusian experts in the mooted Alliance for the Future of the Internet, which reportedly could be one outcome of the December summit. The Belarusian regime, concerned only about its survival, does not think strategically about the dangers to the country of digital technological rivalry, and it neglects any proper screening of digital infrastructure offers from other countries. While the regime subscribes to "Digital Leninism" standards imported from China, there is a need to create a base of knowledge in this field for the future of a democratic independent Belarus, and thus for the United States and other democracies to engage the relevant independent Belarusian experts today.

To paraphrase the Washington Post's slogan, hope for democracy dies in darkness. Without

international attention, it is easier for autocrats like Lukashenka to repress their country's population and get away with it. Since 2020, Belarusians have been paying an enormous price for demanding the chance to live in an open democratic society. This change will have to come from Belarusians, whether still in the country or forced in exile, but increased inter-

national support, including from the United States, could help make it happen. This can start at the Summit for Democracy.

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Bosnia and Herzegovina

Leila Bičakčić

On Short-term U.S. Support

The United States has a long record of taking important and necessary steps to help Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) since the end of the war in the country. The most significant is the Dayton Peace Accord that ended the fighting and opened a process of reconciliation and reconstruction. One of the main aims of U.S. policy toward the country is to support its goals of EU accession and NATO membership, and in that context there have been clear signs of success. The first ten years of postwar reconstruction were marked by strong U.S. leadership, backed with significant financial assistance. This enabled state and judicial institutions to be created and become operational, supported independent media and strengthened civil society organizations, and created a favorable environment for democratic participation by citizens.

Unfortunately, there has been more recently a decline in the implementation of reforms, almost simultaneously to the decrease in U.S. leadership in supporting reform processes in BiH. While a transition to the EU leading in these was expected and natural, it seems that the country was not mature enough to continue on a progressive path toward EU accession without a strong drive by the international community, led by the United States. Control over the necessary reforms has been removed from official institutions and given to political parties, which now decide what they see as important goals for the country. This needs to change by returning ownership of reform processes to state institutions and democratically elected officials. It is time to look back on where the country stood in 2006–2008, when the United States and other donors passed over responsibility to the government, and to assess possibilities for state

institutions to regain control over reform processes. No significant progress toward EU membership, or even candidacy status, is possible unless this happens, and the United States should insist on respecting the leading role of responsible administrative bodies.

The most pressing issue is the ongoing process to reform of the electoral law. U.S. involvement in the process is already significant, but it is necessary to change the approach and to open the process to all stakeholders, distancing the United States from dealing with the country's "tribal chiefs," which has become the norm. A concept of a single national civic society is a prerequisite for the changes that EU accession requires. However, nationalist forces pushing a false interpretation of the Dayton Peace Accord are trying to present the country as a confederation of three ethnic groups represented by its individual political leaders. The current proposal they promote would create three separate electoral entities with majority representation of a single ethnic group and "national votes"—the majority Croat electoral unit would only choose among Croatian candidates and so on. This would further cement ethnic division and distance the country from EU membership. Unfortunately, the United States' approach to the country has fallen victim to this narrative. This needs to change urgently, and its diplomatic engagement should aim at creating an equal-opportunity environment for all citizens.

In terms of assistance programs, the short-term focus of the United States should be on increasing the transparency of public budgets. General elections are due in 2022 and political actors will focus on increasing hostile and conflict narratives, as in elections before, to distract voters' attention from the huge

budget deficit. It is vital and urgent to adopt measures that increase public access to official information from institutions responsible for handling public funds. It is known that parties drain public funds for their interests, and a great deal could be achieved by encouraging and helping the Ministries of Finance at all the different administrative levels to open up their records and provide free access to budgetary and fiscal information. Some groundwork has been done in this regard through the Citizens Budget initiative of the Open Government Partnership, and this would be productively enhanced through with the help of U.S. assistance providers.

On Medium-term U.S. Support

When it comes to U.S. overall policy toward Bosnia in the medium term, the focus should be on reconciliation processes, particularly in the regional context. While the conflict in BiH was concluded with the Dayton Peace Accord, true reconciliation was never achieved. There was a good record in reconciliation programs up until 2005, when this was removed from the list of U.S. priorities. Now it is time to look at reconciliation again from regional perspective and to develop an approach based on a multisectoral perspective. Reconciliation in BiH is not just a question of peacebuilding, it is pivotal for regional cooperation and security, the fight against corruption, and the overall democratization of Western Balkan societies.

U.S. diplomatic efforts could contribute significantly to the reconciliation process, backed by assistance programs facilitating debate and providing support to projects aimed at reaching common ground. Political narratives in the Western Balkans feed off segregation and accusations of others, which has proven a successful formula for politicians seeking to remain in power. The help of external actors, with the United States in the lead, is needed to overcome this. Washington can do this by encouraging more reforms at the regional level in education, civic education measures that involve interested CSOs and media, and more open debates

on common history through formal and informal education institutions. If the Western Balkan countries are ever to become fully democratic and part of the EU, reconciliation and building common ground about the recent past will be vital.

Despite over two decades of intensive reforms, most experts, legal professionals, and the public in Bosnia and Herzegovina agree that the judiciary and public prosecutors remain captured. Those seeking to advance their own interests—from the political and corporate spheres—exert undue influence over the legal system. For that reason, reform of the judicial sector should be the particular focus of U.S. assistance in the next years. While reform of this sector was one of the biggest and most comprehensive efforts after the war, led by the United States until 2006, it is necessary to tackle the issue again. The independence and professionalism of the judicial sector is a backbone of the fight against corruption and state capture as well as a key pillar of EU accession. If the country is to get out of the situation in which it is, it needs professional and independent prosecutors, in particular, capable of leading investigations on the most severe and sophisticated crimes.

Ongoing U.S. assistance to date has taken the country's judiciary to a certain level of professionalism by introducing legislative and procedural changes that have transitioned the system to an early stage of equivalence with the standards in Western democracies. Now it is time to encourage the implementation of the legal framework and to support this with training for prosecutors and researchers to develop the necessary specialized skills, including in financial forensics and asset recovery, in order to secure a professional and politically free environment for judiciary. Assistance to the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council could take the form of supporting direct counselling by international experts placed in its secretariat to improve managerial capacity, which could be further transferred to chief prosecutors and chief judges. U.S. assistance

efforts in this sector also need to be strengthened and coordinated, and to involve agents of change in the judiciary as well as in academia and civil society.

On the Summit for Democracy

The Summit for Democracy could be used as a platform to put a spotlight on the most pressing issues in the Western Balkans. The current approach of dealing with regional problems through bilateral contacts has not brought many results. On the contrary, trying to deal with these problems one after another only aggravates them—issues in the region’s countries are intertwined and should be dealt with simultaneously. In this, civil society should be one of key stakeholders in BiH and in each of the other Western Balkans.

In the wake of the summit and in the months leading to the next one at the end of 2022, the independent monitoring of any reform processes, having a clear overview of progress, and developing recommendations for future steps can be best made with the involvement of local actors with a vested interests in the democratization of their country. While this was the case in the past, there is a new trend in which civil society involvement has been included in different processes simply to “tick the box” of what is required by outside partners, while not being allowed to make a substantial and mean-

ingful contribution. By aligning only with political leaders, the United States and other external partners further damage an already weak system of participatory democracy in each Western Balkan country. This should not be repeated in the implementation of any commitments made at the summit by the BiH government and by its external partners.

The further strengthening of civil society in BiH—in the sense of its internal capacity building, particularly for more sophisticated advocacy activities, as well as in the sense of better positioning it as an unavoidable element in negotiations or relevant source of information—is a prerequisite of successful reform processes. It is particularly necessary to balance narratives from political actors with independent voices in form of independent media, of which few are left, and civil society organizations. The Summit for Democracy process is an opportunity for the United States and the rest of the international community to voice this demand to the country’s political representatives, and then to ensure that this is turned into meaningful actions after the December summit.

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Bulgaria

Louisa Slavkova

On Short-term U.S. Support

Bulgaria has had the second-most coronavirus deaths in the world proportionally to the number of cases and the size of its population; it is the most corrupt and poorest EU country; and it has the fastest-shrinking population in the world. This is a very bleak picture. And, even though it is difficult to establish causal relationships between tragedies like the recent fatal bus crash and bad governance, one cannot avoid the question. In October 2021, another scandal erupted involving the Road Infrastructure Agency, which is accused of granting a state-owned construction company contracts worth billions without tenders.

Civic outrage over endemic corruption brought the political system to its current turbulent state, with three parliamentary elections and two presidential elections, all three months apart, over the past year. New parties pop up in every election cycle only to fade by the next one, cementing the currently most powerful political cleavage—the one between status quo and change parties. Some of the new parties lack structures and political experience, and they promise quick fixes. They remind many older voters of the former party of the ex-King Simeon II, who was exiled during communism—their leaders have Harvard diplomas and successful businesses but little to no experience in government, politics, or parliament. Some of their promises sound like the early 1990s pledge to turn Bulgaria into the Switzerland of the Balkans.

Following the latest elections, a new government is expected to be in place before the end of the year. The United States should strongly support its stability as a short-term goal. The parties expected

to be in office soon have signaled a strong interest in the strategic partnership with Washington, and the latter in turn should communicate its strong support for their “zero corruption” agenda when they form a new government. However, because of the Harvard diplomas of the two leading figures in the new strongest party in parliament—We Continue the Change—the yellow press has been full of articles that see the “long arm” of the U.S. government meddling in the current coalition negotiations. It is thus important that any U.S. support for stability following the formation of the government is not focused heavily on politicians but targeted widely at state officials and civil society experts.

It is not only Bulgaria’s new government that will need stabilization but its democracy as a whole. Popular trust in the parliament and the political parties is at its lowest for the past 30 years. If these institutions are to regain trust as ones representing the people’s will, they need to learn how to serve citizens’ interests and to convince them that democracy offers the best toolkit to preserve civility, solve problems, and manage life in a community. Today, this means restarting to learn parliamentarianism and party politics almost anew. In the 1990s, the Council of Europe introduced schools of politics to help young democracies learn how to live under a multi-party system. Similar programs but adapted to the current realities are needed as much as they were 30 years ago. The new parties know how to use social networks impactfully, but it is unclear yet whether they can do everything else that is part of political daily life in a parliamentary system. An important part of that is reaching compromise, finding common ground, and building and sustaining big

coalitions because the days of comfortable one-party majorities seem to be over.

To that end, the United States could support the immediate launch of programs for the parties represented in parliament, in partnership with local organizations. This would offer what the more traditional political trainings do not: building expertise in policy areas and gaining a deep understanding about institutions and their role, focus on values-based leadership and political skills, and ways of including citizens in various decision-making processes.

On Medium-term U.S. Support

U.S. support will still be needed if the new government manages to stay in power at least for one year. Once it starts facing the challenges of governing in the long term, it will need regular boosts of confidence, if it is still on the right track. The low coronavirus vaccination rates and high vaccination skepticism will most probably result in another lockdown this winter, leading to further job and financial losses. More people will lose their lives and the healthcare system will be again on the brink of collapse. Rising energy prices will continue making the planned transition from coal to greener energy difficult. And, even though the parties trying to form the government want to make Bulgaria “the country that became corruption-free the fastest,” there will still be corruption-related scandals. It is impossible to turn corruption from a way of living into a vice in a short time. Their “zero corruption” agenda will need not only the continuation of the kind of institutional support mentioned above but also help in the form of civil society programs aiming to raise awareness about the rule of law as well as of the costs of corruption and civic disengagement.

When it comes to supporting the fight against corruption, the United States already sent an important signal by sanctioning three Bulgarian individuals and their entities in June. Among them was Delyan Peevski, a media mogul and now freshly reelected parliamentarian of the ethnic Turkish

Movement for Rights and Freedom (DPS). This was the single largest action by the U.S. Treasury targeting foreign corruption under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act. But, while sanctions are an important tool, holistic support that comes in different forms is needed to help Bulgaria uproot corruption, whose roots has its beginnings in the previous century, under communism and beyond. That includes support to help make institutions effective, accountable, and transparent. Above all, the goal should be to depoliticize key ministries, especially those that distribute the most EU funds (agriculture, regional development, etc.) or are responsible for law enforcement (interior). In a country where people do not perceive themselves as citizens, and almost as if they are exogenous to the state and their role is not to actively participate in public life, it is crucial that anti-corruption reforms include citizens so their concerns and voices are really heard. The United States has an extensive track record in deliberations and community engagement and can offer support for how to organize such processes, also by including civil society.

The new parliamentary majority also signaled they want Bulgaria to become a leader in the Balkans, intensifying the economic, energy, and technology relations in the region. A more pragmatic approach of economic interdependence is good as long as it delivers for all citizens. If this approach projects regionally the same democratic values and rule-of-law standards these parties are aiming for domestically, the new government can drive the anti-corruption agenda in the region too. Hence, in the United States’ assistance Bulgaria should be addressed not only individually but also as part of the region.

On the Summit for Democracy

There is nothing more damaging to democracy than only paying lip service to it. The summit should first get the U.S. and other participating governments to

commit to putting into practice at home the democratic principles they promote abroad. Holding yourself as well as others accountable to the same norms is crucial for the legitimacy of democracy around the world.

Second, the role and potential of civic education should be emphasized at the summit and its follow-up, especially when it comes to nurturing citizens' democratic competences, civic engagement, and political participation. A steady neglect of and diminishing funding for civic education—formal, non-formal and informal—as well as a retreat from the humanities in formal education has resulted in a decline in competences such as critical thinking, ethical judgement, empathy, and creativity. Democracies cannot live without democrats and democratic norms cannot be formed without an environment in which citizens of different ages can practice how to argue, deal with controversies and disagree, overcome biases and prejudices, learn to tolerate differences, and respect each other—all while working together for the common good. In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of the potential of civic education for dealing with democratic decline, especially in times of crises. The challenge is now to raise its performance and delivery to match the raised expectations about what it can achieve.

Third, any progress the summit process encourages in terms of engaging civil society organizations is crucial for many reasons, but one stands out with regard to changing political systems like the one in Bulgaria. It remains to be seen how stable the new change vs. status quo cleavage is.

If it is not, this could mean the new government does not last very long or that a “zero corruption” campaign provokes a violent response, which—even though highly unlikely—would be disastrous for the country. The greater the volatility in party politics, the more important it is that civil society organizations build and share expertise with policymakers to support public institutions in times of volatility. Civil society needs to develop its profile more in terms of its expertise in various policy areas, and it also needs to be taken more seriously. It is closer to the realities on the ground and has an important contribution to make, but for this potential to be tapped properly it also needs resources and professionalization.

Finally, special attention needs to be paid to the “civic deserts”—areas with little to no opportunities for civic engagement. These can be found in every country, often outside the big urban centers in peripheral, depopulated areas with few economic opportunities. Civic deserts can also often become “troublemakers” during elections. Citizens living there feel neglected and far away from politics, institutions, the police and hospitals, schools, and culture. Elections are their only chance to “punish” mainstream parties, either by not voting or by voting for anti-systemic parties portraying themselves as the only ones that care about these citizens. Through concerted efforts to boost civic life in these areas, the tide might start to slowly shift there.

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Czech Republic

Pavel Havlíček

On Short-term U.S. Support

There is an urgent need for the government of the Czech Republic to enhance and facilitate cooperation between the state and its citizens represented by civil society. This has again proved to be of crucial importance during the pandemic as, despite efforts by individual ministries and officials, such cooperation has been weak and too fragmented to succeed in the fight against the coronavirus and its multiple impacts. This is true at the communication and partnership levels, including in participation in decision-making processes, in providing financial aid, and in sharing know-how and analytical skills that the state often lacks.

With a new government taking office in Prague following the recent elections, in the short term the United States could help reestablish the largely missing link between the state and citizens and civil society. It should make sure to engage at the senior diplomatic level in a dialogue with the government during its first year in office to explain the importance of civic participation and of reshaping the state's cooperation with civil society, so as to ensure that there is momentum behind this agenda in the wake of the change brought about by the elections. There is also a precedent of good work done in this regard by the U.S. embassy in Prague, which has so far focused on capacity building and bringing in American experts and trainers for exchanges and dialogue with their Czech counterparts. These have shared cases of best practice for capacity building as well as raising public awareness of certain problems and their solutions. This initiative could be scaled up with more similar meetings and fellowship programs in the next year. There is a need also

for Czech participants to visit the United States to witness state-civil society practices at first hand.

During the pandemic, the state—with some exceptions—has offered little to no emergency support to civil society, which has been impacted very negatively. This has worsened the already shrinking space for civic activism. This makes the ongoing need of civil society and pro-democracy actors for core funding, which is largely missing, even more relevant. Reliance on project funding remains predominant, preventing them from developing their capacities for outreach and advocacy. This is to some degree compensated by support from some U.S. and other international donors, but there is room for improvement on their part.

An important step the United States could take would be to establish a short-term specialized coronavirus response mechanism that would help Czech civil society navigate this period of uncertainty and allow it to retain some basic stability and planning capacity. This mechanism could also focus on developing basic related skills and capacities of civic organizations, including in fundraising and more diverse financial management, and in human resources or internal management and growth in the future, among other things.

On Medium-term U.S. Support

The Czech Republic's civil society has traditionally been an influential voice, shaping the public discourse and working for liberal democracy. However, the last years brought a change under the governments that former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and his ANO party were part of. Babiš questioned the role of civic actors, fought with them, and tried to limit the already scarce public

funding and space for civil society. With a new government, there is a window of opportunity to reshape the debate about civic life and the role of civil society actors, and to allow for their better participation and cooperation with the state. There already exists a government strategy for developing civil society and its cooperation with the state, but it largely remained unimplemented due to the unwillingness of the previous government and Babiš to prioritize this agenda.

Therefore, the medium-term goal of the United States should be to work with the new government in implementing the civil society strategy. The lengthy and rather complex document already contains the necessary elements for improving civic participation, establishing meaningful partnership between the state and civil society, and allowing for its further development. It also includes a timeframe and a concrete plan of actions, which should be monitored to guarantee its final implementation, unlike in the past. Implementing the strategy in full will require substantial resources as well as political will to invest in making Czech democracy and civic life more open. To this end, over the next few years, the United States can contribute by making sure its engagement with the government includes support and encouragement along those lines, in order to kick-start the process and allow for its future efficient continuation.

Independent media and journalism are in particular need of attention when it comes to U.S. assistance policy in the next years. The oligarchization of the media market, attacks against well-established and credible public broadcasters, and the rise of disinformation and fringe media in the online space have become crucial challenges. There is a need to support greater capacity building in the existing mainstream media ecosystem as well as for startup funding to new projects. This extends also to initiatives dealing with media and information literacy as well as critical thinking and the debunking of myths and manipulations in the public space. The United States is particularly well-positioned to do, and the

Prague-based Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty could play a more prominent role in delivering courses and training to young Czech journalists and experts in the field.

On the Summit for Democracy

The incoming government has said it is going to refocus Czech foreign policy on democracy and human rights, building on the legacy of Václav Havel. Therefore, there is great potential for U.S.-Czech cooperation on a pro-democracy agenda and on countering authoritarian and illiberal tendencies in Europe and the world. The government's long-term priorities will likely include the promotion of freedom of media and speech, equal opportunities for civic participation including in politics, the integrity of elections, and support to civil society and human rights defenders, which largely correspond to the United States' priorities.

When it comes to the summit process, it is very important for the Czech Republic, the United States, and the other involved actors to produce a communication strategy around these shared priorities and deliver concrete narratives that would support each of the areas. It is also essential to suggest action points to implement these priorities around the world over the next year. A common charter and vision subscribed by all parties should represent the first step for implementation of the common goal and shared vision.

Following from this, there is also a need for an efficient framework under which global democracy efforts could unite. This needs to be multilayered and with multiple themes to cover the wide agenda. One way to approach this to achieve the common goals is to work with individual governments, including the Czech one, on their summit commitments, which can be supported and complemented by local civil society and other pro-democracy actors. This would not require much additional effort and would deliver a structure that could be followed and elaborated by coalitions of the willing

at different levels. This would be highly relevant for the new Czech government, which is going to try to promote these goals particularly in its closest neighborhood, including the Eastern Partnership and Western Balkan countries.

The summit commitments can also offer an advocacy opportunity for civil society to work on, including with the United States and its institutions, around the globe. A group of Czech civil society organizations offer a model for this with their Meet the World efforts to promote the Sustainable Devel-

opment Goals agenda, in which individual organizations pooled their resources but also promised to target specific points, dividing the labor in order to efficiently achieve common goals—a structure that proved light on administration.

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Georgia

Nino Evgenidze

On Short-term U.S. Support

The Black Sea region is vital to the strategic interest of the United States in deterring Russian aggression, ensuring European stability, and protecting freedom of navigation. Insufficient resources and attention have undermined its ability to effectively pursue these objectives while Russia has stepped up its aggression and China is increasing its foothold in the region. During his first visit to Georgia in October, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and his Georgian counterpart signed a memorandum of understanding on a Georgia Defense and Deterrence Enhancement Initiative. This aims to replace the Georgia Defense Readiness Program ending in December. The initiative will be the central point of crucially important defense and security cooperation. It is difficult to conceive the existence of a consolidated democracy in Georgia without a strong and effective security apparatus capable of responding to the challenges that face it. With the key priorities of strengthening Georgia's capacities for effective deterrence, fostering interoperability with NATO, and modernizing the defense forces, the timely and full implementation of the initiative in 2022 should be the most important short-term U.S. policy step in Georgia.

The establishment in Georgia of a permanent training center or center of excellence on hybrid threats for the Black Sea region to serve as a focal point for defense cooperation (with a possible regional dimension) would be a good start for implementing the memorandum and for sending a strong message about the seriousness of the initiative. Simultaneously, Georgia's military and civilian infrastructure (airstrips, ports, and so on) should be upgraded to the level of strategic interoperability with the United States and NATO to be able

to receive pre-positioned troops and military equipment from strategic partners.

But any increase in U.S. defense or security assistance must be conditioned on strengthening democracy in Georgia and come with pressure on the government to respect democratic norms. In particular, the level of state capture and the influence of informal groups on Georgia's government calls for deepening and recalibrating U.S. engagement with civil society and business actors as well as the government. In this, a strong emphasis should be on ensuring the independence of the judiciary—the most critical issue the United States can begin to address in the near term.

The impact of politically corrupt and controlled judicial institutions was best illustrated by the withdrawal of the ruling Georgian Dream party from the April political agreement brokered by EU Council president Charles Michel, which was backed by the United States in July. It is difficult to see any meaningful progress toward strengthening the rule of law without major changes in the state of judicial institutions. After the withdrawal, there is no longer any concrete conditionality related to improving the independence of the judiciary. This issue must be put back on the table and the right conditions created to incite the government to reform the judiciary. The government's refusal to reform the judicial system reinforces zero-sum politics, increases the risk of electoral fraud and politicized justice, and consolidates informal oligarchic influence over state institutions.

On Medium-term U.S. Support

Few actions would demonstrate U.S. support for Georgia more than negotiating and concluding a

free trade agreement (FTA). Through its continuous economic reforms and its steadfast support of the West on the international stage, the country has proven itself worthy of this. The United States and Georgia have already implemented measures to accelerate trade liberalization between them. Introduced in 2012, the High-Level Trade Dialogue is the main framework for deepening bilateral economic relations and increasing trade and investment. An FTA would strengthen a strong and longstanding trade relationship: the two countries already have a Bilateral Investment Treaty (1994) and a Bilateral Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (2007).

The United States is the only major strategic partner of Georgia with which the latter does not have an FTA, unlike, say with the European Union. In addition to setting a strategic milestone in bilateral relations and sending an important political message, an FTA will substantially enhance Georgia's export potential and economic prospects. It would also facilitate U.S. investments that will provide an alternative to Russian and Chinese ones, which undermine the United States' interests in the region.

With parliamentary elections due in 2024, it is of utmost importance to improve the transparency and the political independence of Georgia's Central Electoral Commission (CEC). Numerous irregularities and dysfunctions in the electoral process have weakened public trust in elections and in democracy, provoked a months-long political crisis, and aggravated society's polarization. Georgian democracy will never emerge without politically independent and transparent electoral administration. If there is one thing U.S. assistance policy can do to improve the democratic dynamic in Georgia in the next three years, it is helping to ensure the political independence and neutrality of the CEC.

In the process, the United States should not repeat the mistakes made elsewhere, where assistance toward the independence of institutions was counterproductive by helping insulate politically corrupt ones from civil society oversight and demo-

cratic accountability. If promoting best practices is not combined with a preliminary "cleaning" of the system, assistance can let corrupt structures and informal groups further hijack institutions and make their capture even more total. This was witnessed in Georgia with the creation by the CEC of an Information Protection Center (IPC), with U.S. assistance, with the aim to strengthen its ability to counter election-related disinformation. Being under political influence, the CEC weaponized the IPC resources to attack media organizations and civil society groups that criticized shortcomings and dysfunctions of the electoral administration, accusing them of disinformation. In September 2021, the United States had to terminate this assistance to the CEC.

It is necessary to reexamine the approach of U.S. assistance to the CEC in its entirety, as the result of years of reforms and projects is far from satisfactory. Today, it is a hijacked and politically corrupt institution without a modicum of independence that would have allowed for free and fair elections. The United States, through its embassy and relevant agencies, must take note of this situation and be more vocal in pointing out the unacceptable behavior of a supposedly independent and impartial institution.

On the Summit for Democracy

It is of absolute importance to have the case of Georgian democracy discussed at the highest international level, including at the two planned summits. In one form or another, Georgian democratic civil society should have an opportunity to make its voice heard in the summit process. Operating in an increasingly authoritarian and hostile environment, its presence will be helpful for improving not only the visibility and credibility of activists, but also their protection from possible pressure and intimidation.

Beyond this, the summit's focus on kleptocracy could be crucial for Georgia, which has made modest progress in implementing international anti-corruption recommendations and commitments. In 2019,

the OECD Anti-Corruption Network judged that Georgia had made no progress in implementing the majority of its 81 recommendations. Considerable shortcomings remain in fulfilling the recommendations of the Council of Europe's Group of States against Corruption or the anti-corruption commitments of the EU Association Agreement.

The Summit for Democracy process should contribute to the introduction of the clear-cut democracy and rule of law conditionality in any aid or assistance program to Georgia, which is of utmost importance. As elsewhere, the illiberal forces operating in Georgia are well versed in the functioning and policymaking of U.S. and Western institutions, which enables them to more or less successfully operate "under the radar" and avoid negative attention in the West. Moving Georgia's external partners toward the conditioning of all assistance and support on democratic progress would be a good use of U.S. influence and get the attention of Georgian officials.

Along with conditionality to combat kleptocracy, it is important for the United States and other

external partners to send a clear message to Georgia's government that corruption is unacceptable and that systemic reform is needed, at the summit and after it. Georgia should be included in any regional or global initiative aiming to combat corruption and kleptocracy. The United States and others should also consider sanctions against individuals implicated in state capture, high-level corruption, and related activities in Georgia. As seen in the cases of Moldova and Ukraine, the public designation of individuals involved in grand corruption is a powerful U.S. tool when it comes to combating oligarchic influence and kleptocracy. The Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act is among the most effective tools for dealing with Russia-backed oligarchs and their allies. The use of anti-corruption sanctions would have a significant impact in Georgia at the economic and political levels.

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Hungary

Daniel Hegedüs

On Short-term U.S. Support

Over the past decade, Hungary under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has been in the vanguard of autocratization and illiberalism in Europe. Against that background, questions related to democracy, human rights, corruption, and malign foreign influence have played an important—but not always straightforward—role in its relations with the United States. U.S. efforts to constrain Hungary’s democratic backsliding and to offset its increasingly close relations to authoritarian powers like Russia and China remained rather fruitless, however.

Although Hungary is a NATO member, the United States appears to view security and economic relations with it to be of middling importance at best. Nonetheless, the country cannot be ignored because of its veto or obstruction potential in the EU and NATO. The fact that Hungary is the only EU member state that was not invited to the Summit for Democracy shows that Washington is now paying more attention to democracy-related developments in the country.

In the short term, the United States’ priority should be to guarantee the integrity of the parliamentary elections in April 2022 and, in that context, to abstain from any move that could elevate the status of Orbán. The integrity of Hungary’s elections has been in steep decline, with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) labeling the 2014 and 2018 parliamentary elections as “free but not fair.”

One important step for the United States would be to refrain from sending a new ambassador to Budapest and from conducting high-level bilateral talks before the April elections. Official announce-

ments and communication should speak out about the skewed electoral playing field that favors the governing Fidesz party. Furthermore, Washington should voice strong criticism of any moves by Orbán to change the electoral or campaign rules in the run-up to the elections—as he already began doing in November—to undermine the opposition. The lack of criticism in case of such developments would strengthen the regime’s position, be seen as weakness of the U.S. administration, and undermine the legitimacy of Biden’s democracy agenda.

The United States should also mobilize its diplomacy to forge a coalition of OSCE countries to secure the deployment of a full election observation mission with an appropriate number of short-term and long-term observers. In 2018, the OSCE’s main argument against a full mission was that the considerable election-day irregularities expected—and later documented—would not significantly influence the results. In 2022, due to the close race between Fidesz and the united opposition, these may have a significant impact. A full mission with a large number of observers could deter the regime from greater election-day irregularities—and, even if not, it could play a crucial role in their documentation. And the United States should also prepare a contingency plan for the eventuality that Orbán remains in power through rigged elections, abandoning the last democratic remnants of his regime.

Finally, as it did ahead of the 2020 elections in Bulgaria and Slovakia with individuals involved in political corruption in these countries, the Biden administration should deploy targeted sanctions based on the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act against the main stakeholders

of political corruption in Hungary, like Prosecutor General Péter Polt, Orbán's economic front man and key oligarch Lőrinc Mészáros, or Orbán's son-in-law István Tiborcz.

With regard to the short-term priority of democracy assistance, U.S. agencies should support the urgent electoral-integrity goal by swiftly directing resources to Hungary's nongovernmental organizations and initiatives—like 20k22, Let's Count Together or Unhack Democracy—that recruit and train civic ballot counters to guarantee the transparency and integrity of the count in as many polling stations as possible. Short-term support should also be provided to media outlets and initiatives that challenge Fidesz's media dominance in rural areas. By following those two priorities and acting swiftly, U.S. democracy assistance could at least slightly mitigate the uneven political playing field in the run-up to the elections.

On Medium-term U.S. Support

The United States' approach to Hungary will be determined by the outcome of the elections.

In case of an opposition win, U.S. diplomacy should closely follow and support the country's re-democratization process. Washington will have to pay special attention to the difficulties arising from the state capture and the political control of Fidesz cronies over key institutions of checks and balances, like the Constitutional Court, the Office of the Prosecutor General, or the Media Council, which can make re-democratization without a violation of Hungarian constitutional law extremely difficult.

Providing symbolic and material help to rebuild democracy in Hungary will have crucial importance. This could include police and intelligence cooperation in support of anti-corruption investigations against former acolytes of the Orbán regime, strong diplomatic support for the new democratic government, and scaling up democracy assistance with a focus on media pluralism, public participation, and democracy education.

In case of a Fidesz victory, especially if the elections fall short of democratic standards, the United States should set out clear conditions for reengaging with the government. This should include clear red lines regarding Hungary's strategic cooperation with Russia and China, the government's compliance with rulings of the European Court of Justice and the European Court on Human Rights, Hungary joining the European Public Prosecutor's Office, and measurable commitments to reverse Orbán's authoritarian power grab. The United States should also raise the issue of democracy in Hungary in talks with key EU and NATO allies, like France or Germany, and put it on the agenda of EU-U.S. talks to provide an impetus for the union to take the authoritarian challenge within its membership seriously.

With a continuation of the Fidesz regime, the United States should also consider Hungary as being in sustained need of strategic democracy assistance. The further the country's autocratization develops, the more crucial will be external material and non-material support for its independent watchdogs, human rights and democracy nongovernmental organizations, including financial support provided by the U.S. Agency for International Development and close, direct coordination by the U.S. embassy with pro-democracy players.

High-level political corruption should be the particular focus of U.S. democracy assistance. In no other Central and Eastern European country is the phenomenon so concentrated and such an organic part of the regime's modus operandi. Helping corruption watchdogs and investigative media outlets is vital—the preservation of the last remnants of media pluralism, through financial support and launching Hungarian-language radio and television broadcast programs of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, is an urgent need. Efforts to bring to light any ties of illicit finance and other forms of corruption between regime circles in Hungary and authoritarian or criminal actors on the international stage may also help to circumvent the political control

of the Prosecutor General's Office and to launch criminal investigation against acolytes of the Orbán regime under foreign jurisdiction.

What is more, if the United States turns a blind eye to the political corruption in Hungary, this may have a significant negative impact on the credibility and legitimacy of its anti-corruption efforts globally.

On the Summit for Democracy

With an eye on the second Summit for Democracy in 2022, strengthening the participation of civil society in the process and highlighting the importance of local democracy—for example, through the Pact of Free Cities initiative—would be of the utmost importance for Hungary's pro-democracy forces, regardless of the outcome of the April 2022 elections. In case of an opposition win, it will be essential for the United States and Hungary's other international partners to highlight the importance of the country's re-democratization and to support it with all the symbolic

measures the toolkit of the Summit for Democracy process can provide. Progress in this endeavor will demonstrate that the spell of illiberal autocratization can be broken. One measure could be for example the holding of an official Summit for Democracy side event in Budapest.

In case of a victory by Fidesz, the shunning policy taken by the United States for this year's summit should be the baseline for the upcoming years is well. Deviation from that policy should only be considered by Washington if the Orbán regime is not only ready to sign up to meaningful, objective, measurable, and binding political commitments aiming at reestablishing of checks and balances and the re-democratization of Hungary, but also delivers on these commitments in the run-up to the 2022 summit.

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Kosovo

Agon Maliqi

On Short-term U.S. Support

Kosovo's democratic prospects are highly dependent on broader developments in the Western Balkans and U.S. policy at the regional level. The region is at a dangerous inflection point and faces serious risks that may undermine the achievements of the past two decades in fostering peace, democracy, and development. The stalled EU enlargement process has removed a key incentive for resolving Kosovo's dispute with Serbia, which undermines democracy and feeds authoritarianism in both countries by keeping security concerns at the forefront. It has also weakened the effectiveness of EU conditionality—a critical external anchor of democratic reforms—and disillusioned pro-democracy forces in the region. Having in mind that Kosovo (together with Bosnia and Herzegovina) are not NATO members, it has also made the region vulnerable to Russia's destabilization efforts, including in Kosovo's north.

Therefore, considering the implications for European security, the United States should in the short term use its decisive leverage to elevate the EU and NATO paths of the Western Balkans to the top of the transatlantic agenda. To this end, it could more specifically work with skeptical EU member states to unlock the region's EU accession path. This includes first and foremost a positive decision on the long-delayed EU visa liberalization for Kosovo, as well as the start of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia. The United States could also play a leading role in reviving, or potentially resetting into a new format, the stalled Kosovo-Serbia dialogue with the aim of ensuring mutual recognition. More specifically, the United States could support Kosovo's efforts to gain recognition from the four NATO member states

(Greece, Spain, Slovakia, and Romania) and one additional EU member (Cyprus) that do not recognize it. This would be a game changer that would ensure the country's equal footing in the region and open its Euro-Atlantic path. Finally, as an accelerator of the region's EU and NATO accession, the United States could work with the EU to define the clear framework for regional cooperation by complementing or merging initiatives such as the Common Regional Market and Open Balkan.

U.S. assistance has played a key role in building Kosovo's democratic institutional framework and in keeping the media space plural and civil society vibrant. This has enabled democratic accountability mechanisms to work and overcome elements of state capture. Over the past few years, Kosovo has done better than its regional peers on many democratic indicators, including competitive and fair elections, leading to several smooth transitions of power. Experience from other countries has shown, however, that progress can reverse easily in contexts where institutions are weak and vulnerable to capture by narrow interests. The new governing elite, which came to power in February 2021 on a rule-of-law and anti-corruption agenda, has a wide majority and a mandate for reforms. U.S. assistance to reform efforts in these areas will be critical to ensuring that the agenda succeeds and consolidates public trust in democracy. However, there are also risks associated with reforms that may lead to renewed political control over institutions. Several decisions by Kosovo's new leadership—including, for example, the controversial discharge of the chairwoman of the Elections Commission, which was criticized by many civil society organizations—seemed politically moti-

vated and raise concerns about the potential abuse of reforms.

Therefore, the United States should in the short term direct its assistance focus and resources for Kosovo to the dual goal of supporting the government's agenda in the fight against corruption and organized crime, while also protecting political space and independent institutions from the rise of a new form of majoritarian rule. In practical terms, this means ensuring that existing rule-of-law assistance programs focus on transparency and meritocracy in the announced government reform efforts, such as, for example, the vetting in the judiciary, which has not been supported by the EU. It also means increasing funding for independent media and civil society to sustain demands for accountability from the government in the announced reform efforts. Finally, it means expanding capacity support (through, for example, the National Democratic Institute and IRI) to opposition political parties and their new leaderships in the efforts for internal reforms. The experience in the Western Balkans has shown that pluralism cannot be sustained without credible oppositions.

On Medium-term U.S. Support

The eventual revival of the Euro-Atlantic path for the Western Balkans and U.S. support for regional cooperation mechanisms needs to be associated with restoring the credibility of conditionality policy, which should incentivize adherence to democratic norms. This is more the EU's responsibility, but the United States also plays a key role as a security leader with leverage and stakes in the region. Over the past decade, incentives for democratic reforms were distorted due to the prioritization of regional security concerns and the appeasement of authoritarian leaderships. This realist posture has had dire consequences for democracy in the region because it perverted incentives and rewarded the securitization of the political agenda. By enabling the kind of strongman rule that suffocates institutions and the rule of law, this approach was also responsible for turning Western Balkans

countries into unappealing EU accession candidates, while at the same time failing to resolve the region's security problems. As such, it has been a self-defeating strategy in achieving a U.S. regional goal. Therefore, Kosovo's and the region's Euro-Atlantic path and U.S. partnership should over the next few years be tied to, and defined by, a stronger commitment to democratic values. More specifically, the United States should actively hold regional leaders accountable and condition its partnerships and assistance strategy with strict conditions on the rule of law and media freedoms, and not just on foreign and security policy alignment.

Two defining demographic features of Kosovo are its youth bulge (the country has the youngest population in Europe) and a strong gender imbalance in society (despite considerable progress over the past decade). Young people and women have also been strong agents of democratic resilience by standing at the forefront of demands for accountability in the face of government corruption, particularly in the recent groundbreaking elections. The increased public trust in the country's democratic institutions over the past year also corresponds to the higher share of youth and women voting for change and assuming positions of leadership, especially in governing institutions. Yet the challenges for women and youth remain stark in the medium term as the labor market is unable to absorb the large numbers of young people entering it while women struggle to push the boundaries of strong patriarchal norms. This context creates a fertile ground for disillusionment in democracy, continued high rates of emigration, or a return to earlier patterns of radicalization. Therefore, U.S. assistance to Kosovo should, over the medium term, prioritize projects and initiatives focusing on youth and women empowerment as a key factor of democratic resilience.

On the Summit for Democracy

First, the process should lead to commitments that are not too general or vague but are easier to measure, even in qualitative terms; include regional- and/or

country-specific commitments as well as global ones; and provide clear incentives for countries to adhere to commitments and attach some type of conditionality to them in terms of the quality of partnerships with the United States and its assistance. Second, the summit commitments and their implications should be clearly communicated throughout the year at the country level and local democratic civil society should take a leading role in this strategic communications effort. Third, since the Summit for Democracy aims to provide a framework for U.S. engagement on democracy at the global level, democratic civil society in Kosovo would benefit from becoming part of some

type of global civil society platform associated with the summit and involved in monitoring progress on commitments. This would not only enable engagement and exchange with peers, but also empower and legitimize civil society actors in the country. Finally, for those countries not invited to the summit, it would be helpful if the United States elaborated on the reasons for the exclusion and started a dialogue for inclusion in the next one, which would include civil society actors.

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Lithuania

Maksimas Milta

On Short-term U.S. Support

In December 2020, a new coalition government took office in Lithuania. One of its five strategic projects for its term in office, approved by the parliament, is to make the country “a center of freedom and democracy development.” And, since then, a “value-driven foreign policy” has been one of the pillars of the government’s action. Not surprisingly, a vocal pro-democratic agenda toward Belarus, Russia, and China has encountered spillover effects and attempts to challenge and undermine the democratic consensus in the largest of the Baltic states.

While Lithuania has consistently received high scores for its democratic performance from institutions such as Freedom House over the years, it continues to struggle with legislating an appropriate framework for same-sex partnerships and national minority groups.

Although same-sex relations are not illegal, legislative loopholes make it virtually impossible for any same-sex couple to regularize its status, including for issues of household, inheritance, and family care. When a new Civil Code was adopted in 2000, a special provision encouraged the government to draft a Civil Partnerships Law by 2002. Twenty years after this deadline, civil partnerships have not been legalized. The most recent attempt to adopt the legislation failed to pass the first reading in parliament. Although society demonstrates a visible level of same-sex tolerance, especially in Vilnius, which hosted highly attended Baltic Prides in 2010, 2013, 2016, and 2019 (an event held on a rotating basis with Riga, Latvia and Tallinn, Estonia), the inability to produce a legal framework for gender-neutral partnerships undermines civil rights.

According to official statistics, up to 14.1 percent of Lithuania’s population was non-Lithuanian in 2020, with Poles and Russians making up 72 percent of the ethnic minorities. Unlike its Baltic neighbors, the country provided universal citizenship to all residents following regaining its independence. There is municipalities-funded school instruction in the languages of national minorities, and private higher-education providers are able to operate in languages like Russian, Polish, and Belarusian. However, since 2010, Lithuania has no operational legislation that would regulate ethnic minorities, and specifically the use of minority languages in public agencies, aspects of culture, and education. This weakens the inclusion of national minorities in the country’s democratic governance and public life.

Therefore, one simple short-term step that the United States could take is to support and encourage through its diplomatic engagement Lithuania’s political establishment in rapidly plugging these legislative gaps. This would have a clear impact in strengthening the rule of law, institutional openness, and inclusion in the country.

The period 2016–2020 under the previous government coalition saw instances of restricting the access of journalists to public information and a failed attempt to reduce the autonomy of the public broadcaster LRT. Meanwhile, in the last few years the media landscape has been altered by the emergence of subscriber-based, independent digital media providers, of which Laisvės TV (Freedom TV) is the most notable. Another striking trend has been the rise of investigative journalism. This used to be marginal for the mainstream media but now almost all media providers has their own investigative team. In addition, projects like Siena

(The Wall) or Demaskuok.lt (Debunk) have showed the rise of a synthesis of investigative journalism and resilience-building. The capacity of decentralized journalism actors and communities, like NARA, to produce appealing and resonating media content, including investigative journalism, has become a feature of the media space.

Although Lithuania receives from different external sources democracy assistance—for example, to strengthen active citizenship—funding to support independent journalism remains scarce. A relatively small amount of short-term funding by the United States through programs like the Emerging Donors Challenge Program of its Agency for International Development would be a worthy “seed” investment in strengthening investigative journalism in Lithuania. This would support the staff costs and operational activity of a handful of carefully selected small (4–5 staff) or micro (1–2 staff) independent journalistic outlets. And, as well as fostering investigative journalism and resilience in the country, this has the potential to serve as a best-practice example for other countries in the region where there is the same context. This would follow the example of fact-checking tools developed by Lithuanian journalists, like *debunk.eu* and *Checked by 15min*, that have been recognized internationally.

On Medium-term U.S. Support

The advancement of democracy in Belarus, including assistance to the country, has been at the core of Lithuania’s foreign policy consensus for the last two decades. The repercussions of the crisis in Belarus since the fraudulent elections of August 2020 have brought unprecedented disruptions, the most impactful being the recent weaponization of migrant transit by the Minsk regime. The border with Belarus has been one of the main topics of the domestic political debate in the last months. The unprecedented pressure and the vulnerability, derived from the absence of universal 24/7 surveillance along it, led the government to decide to construct a physical fence along the border. Yet, beyond the measures in response to the ongoing

crisis and for mitigating its security component, the situation makes more relevant Lithuania’s insufficient infrastructure to handle the inflow of migrants from other than “traditional” countries of origin (that is, those in Eastern Europe and Central Asia), which has been ignored for a long time.

The current trend of economic and welfare growth in Lithuania, as well as the likelihood of more attempts at weaponizing migration in the medium term, make clear the necessity to develop this infrastructure, including dislocation centers and health and education services for migrants. If Lithuania seeks to further demonstrate its democracy track and to position itself of a regional leader in democratic governance, its humanitarian support cannot be directed only at a preferred few countries (in 2015–2020, 46 percent of all asylum seekers in Lithuania came from Russia, Tajikistan, and Belarus). The role of the United States in encouraging Lithuania to allocate financial and human resources to accommodate asylum seekers not only from traditional countries of origin but also the broader world will be vital.

In 2018, on the 100th anniversary of independence, a nationwide competition was held to identify three “brave ideas” for the advancement of Lithuania. One was “Teacher – a prestigious profession by 2025.” Regardless of the media hype and public debate on the matter, insufficient excellence in school teaching has been an omnipresent aspect of the domestic policy debate. Despite the introduction of financial incentives to students to pursue a career in school education, additional funding for teacher training, and establishing regional hubs of teacher training, Lithuania still lags in international ratings of overall education standards. Despite the adoption of successive education policies, most recently in September 2021, experts say that inertia is an intrinsic characteristic of the education system, and a structural shift is yet to come. A rigorous and excellence-driven education system is essential to ensuring democratic civic and community engagement. The establishment of a state-of-the-art exchange and capacity-building

program for schoolteachers, supported by the United States, would be a tangible contribution to strengthening the foundations of democratic governance and civic education in Lithuania.

On the Summit for Democracy

One of the major paradoxes of democracy in Lithuania is that, despite the country being a parliamentary republic with elements of semi-presidential governance, the parliament is the second-least trusted institutions after political parties. This helps make the political environment vulnerable to protest votes and populists. Hence, strengthening democracy, is inseparable from the parliament regaining trust of the people. At the same time, civil society organizations (CSOs) and public figures have demonstrated their potential in fostering civic engagement as well as raising grassroots democratic awareness. Campaigns, like the Way of Freedom of August 2020, which brought together a human chain of about 50,000 participants expressing solidarity with the democratic movement in Belarus show the potential in Lithuanian society—one that makes it resilient to external threats undermining democracy.

States participating in the Summit for Democracy should be encouraged to pledge to ensure domestic

support to CSOs. In Lithuania, an incentive to broaden the framework of financial support to these, many of which rely exclusively on the 1.2 percent income-tax deduction scheme, would be welcome progress. This would support civil society and ensure its independence from the government. A call to the participating states to foster participatory modes of policymaking and decision-taking, such as for the national budget, would also be a meaningful way of rebuilding the trust in political institutions while narrowing the gap between citizens and elected representatives.

Finally, ensuring there is a civil society arm of the Summit for Democracy process and providing sufficient resources for CSOs to run domestic awareness campaigns and to organize a series of debate on the purpose of the summits (similarly to the Conference on the Future of Europe) would ensure a sense of public accountability related to the pledges by the participating states and to the state of democratic governance in each one, including Lithuania.

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Moldova

Iulian Groza and Mihai Mogildea

On Short-term U.S. Support

Cooperation between the United States and Moldova relies on a shared commitment to supporting good governance and the rule of law. While the United States has been a longstanding partner for Moldova's transformation process, Chisinau's governing elites have periodically undermined the potential for a more enhanced and multilayered dialogue with Washington. Democratic backsliding and lack of reform will across the political leadership limited Moldova's ambitions with regard to transatlantic cooperation for many years. Following the political changes brought by the recent presidential and parliamentary elections, the new authorities should use the latest positive momentum and develop a visionary policy toward the United States, aimed at addressing domestic challenges and exploring new opportunities.

In the short term, investigation of Moldova's notorious banking fraud and the needed asset recovery is going to be a serious test for the government. The United States could enhance its institutional dialogue with the Office of the Prosecutor General and anti-corruption bodies in Moldova to provide support for the asset-recovery process. It could establish an institutional framework for continuous interaction and exchange of best practices with Moldovan counterparts. Asset freezes and recovery, especially with regard to bank accounts and properties held in the United States by Moldovan kleptocrats, could accelerate the investigation of the banking fraud and the return of stolen funds to the national budget. U.S. support for the government's initiative of vetting judges and prosecutors is another related short-term priority. Activating targeted personal restrictive measures under the U.S. Global Magnitsky Act against Moldovan fugi-

tive kleptocrats and their associates could also be part of the international effort to speed up investigations of high-level corruption cases and international asset-recovery efforts.

The recent visit to Chisinau by the administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, Samantha Power, might have helped pave the way for the upgrading of assistance to rule-of-law and anti-corruption efforts in Moldova. Capacity-building activities and technical advice could strengthen the operational functionality of the prosecutor's office and other investigative structures. A concept for vetting judges and prosecutors has been published by the government, which includes input from Moldovan think tanks. It is currently being reviewed, in cooperation with experts from the United States, the EU, and the Council of Europe. The concept is set to be voted into law in the next months and is projected to apply by mid-2022. The United States could support the vetting by providing technical assistance to prepare and implement the mechanism, delegating international experts, and assisting the setting up and work of a functional secretariat for the vetting committees as well as an international monitoring mission.

On Medium-term U.S. Support

The democratic transformation in Moldova will depend on its resilience against external threats and challenges. Moldova's security sector is still weak and incapable of responding appropriately to a wide range of hybrid threats, from disinformation to cyber or military ones. The country's declared status of neutrality has restrained reform ambitions on security matters. Low spending on defense (around 0.5 percent of the GDP) and a sense of disinterest in building strong

security institutions have characterized the low-profile political agenda in this field.

The United States, directly and through NATO, should intensify institutional efforts for a deeper partnership with Moldova in cyber security, intelligence, and military infrastructure. The modernization of the army through training, acquisition of military equipment, and exchange programs should be strengthened in the next years. The United States should pay particular attention to supporting the current efforts of the authorities to develop an inter-institutional early-warning mechanism against hybrid threats. Washington's and NATO's experience in building and operationalizing such a mechanism could be particularly useful. A group of experts could be deployed to Chisinau by the United States to instruct and advise Moldova's institutions on conceptualizing, testing, and implementing this mechanism. Furthermore, the United States could increase direct budgetary support for the government in security and defense. The positive practices of strict conditionality and result-based assistance could generate a long-standing impact for Moldova's still fragile security resilience.

Another potential area that requires U.S. assistance in the next two years is electoral reform and the implementation of Internet voting for the next parliamentary and presidential elections. The Central Electoral Commission has recently initiated the process to revise the Electoral Code, which should improve the transparency and fairness of electoral competition. There is overall support among the parliamentary majority for implementing alternative voting methods given the characteristics of the electorate, including the fact that many citizens reside abroad. Once the reform is voted by the parliament, the United States could assist Moldova's electoral authorities to procure the necessary technical equipment, to develop IT solutions, and to test the Internet voting system.

Finally, the United States should consider launching a second Millennium Challenge Corporation program for Moldova as soon as the first results of the justice and anticorruption reforms start to emerge. The first

program provided more than \$260 million, mainly for infrastructure and agricultural projects. A second one could help the country's sustainable development, promote a more resilient economy and, energy security, increase regional connectivity, and support the development of the education and health systems.

On the Summit for Democracy

In today's world, which is affected by multiple crises and mounting challenges to democracy, Moldova is an island of hope following the recent developments that brought about a government with an ambitious anti-corruption agenda, backed by a landslide parliamentary majority and a pro-reform president. Yet it needs today probably more than ever the upgraded, targeted, and tailored support of the United States and its EU partners in this process. The Summit for Democracy provides a great opportunity for securing the country's recent transformation process and to introduce key short-to-medium-term policy commitment aiming at rebuilding functional democratic institutions and implementing the justice and anticorruption reforms, which are expected to bring tangible results for citizens.

The summit could also build upon existing regional cooperation formats and explore opportunities for increasing their outputs. For example, the recently launched EU Association Trio of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine has the potential to generate development and regional infrastructure strategic projects as well as to push forward the transformation process in these countries. Connecting the trio to ongoing U.S. and EU strategic formats like the Three Seas Initiative should also enable long-term investment opportunities and sustainable economic development. The security dimension should stay at the very center of this vision, while democratic resilience should be at the top of its expected results.

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North Macedonia

Marko Pankovski

On Short-term U.S. Support

The clear commitment of the current U.S. administration to the European future of the Western Balkans as a prerequisite for democratic development is positively received in the country. The October 2021 joint EU-U.S. statement signaled much-needed support for this ambition when some EU member states questioned the future of enlargement. It confirmed Washington's continued support for the Euro-Atlantic future of North Macedonia across different presidential administrations. This is crucial to advance major political processes in the country and to confirm there is still a shared vision between the EU and the United States regarding the region's future. The joint statement also showed that the complexity of the challenges in the Balkans requires a coordinated transatlantic approach.

In the short term, the United States needs to intensify its work with Bulgaria and North Macedonia to resolve their bilateral dispute, which is essential for unlocking the latter's path toward EU membership. With Bulgaria questioning the history, language, and national identity of North Macedonia—factors that are not part of the Copenhagen criteria for EU membership—the dispute needs to be resolved outside the EU accession framework and the United States can make a major contribution here. To address the asymmetry of the dispute, the United States must increase diplomatic pressure on Bulgaria's new government following the November elections. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Gabriel Escobar's expectations for a solution by the end of this year were welcome but ambitious, considering the current relations between North Macedonia and Bulgaria are at an all-time low. The next 12 months is a more feasible timeframe, especially

considering there are no scheduled elections in either country. The October 2021 local elections in North Macedonia have already put pressure on the government and its thin parliamentary majority. The United States needs to intensify its efforts quickly since every prolongation will further complicate moving forward.

The United States is also instrumental in helping North Macedonia sustain its reform momentum. Since the country's independence, U.S. support in democratization and legal and regulatory reforms helped it get closer to its democratic goals and to the European Union. Over the next year, the United States should focus on its support for digitalization as an effective way to improve governance, increase transparency, and prevent corruption. The announced U.S.-facilitated cooperation with Estonia on supporting the digital transformation of North Macedonia is a promising way forward and provides concrete support. Comprehensive support is vital as operationalization of assistance programs in the local context is often more complex than anticipated. This process must be augmented with the inclusion of civil society in providing institutional support and monitoring of commitments, especially in areas related to anti-corruption, such as the judiciary and public prosecution. Monitoring these commitments is required in the absence of political continuity—something that is not limited to government changes—which often undermines investments in long-term processes in the country.

On Medium-term U.S. Support

North Macedonia is not immune to the rise of populism and radical right-wing sentiments. Most of these processes are fueled by impunity and continuous alle-

gations of corruption, sometimes in the highest levels of government. The dissatisfaction over the performance of the public prosecution and the judiciary is a fertile ground for populists as it allows them to galvanize supporters against mainstream politics.

President Joe Biden's executive order denying entry to the United States to persons contributing to destabilization of the Western Balkans and blocking property is a good start. It needs to be operationalized and put into action quickly, similar to the Department of Treasury's sanctions on individuals with extensive roles in corruption in Bulgaria. Such action is needed in the case of North Macedonia as the impunity enjoyed by individuals with similar profiles—some of whom were close to the previous government of Nikola Gruevski—makes it easier for populists to gather support while spreading authoritarian and anti-Western narratives in the country. Impunity and high-level corruption also help rising populist parties such as North Macedonia's Left Party gain popular support by using an anti-corruption rhetoric. At the same time, they are anti-NATO and encourage strategic cooperation with China, geopolitical preferences they choose not to communicate to the public. This “under the radar” authoritarianism is a considerable risk for North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic future and needs to be addressed by limiting the factors that fuel these narratives.

In the long run, deterring authoritarian influence requires strong institutions, engaged citizens, and the rule of law. U.S. assistance to North Macedonia needs to contribute to long-term societal and institutional resilience as the only way for sustainable democratization. It must be clear that the government's geopolitical alignment will not lead to guaranteed U.S. support without also a satisfactory performance in anti-corruption and good governance. The growing Chinese influence in the country, which relies on weak governance standards in public procurement or impact assessment, exposes these vulnerabilities.

In implementing its 2021–2025 North Macedonia Country Development Cooperation Strategy, the U.S.

Agency for International Development (USAID) is set to provide \$56.6 million for efforts to reduce corruption, increase economic competitiveness, and increase youth engagement. Prioritizing anti-corruption is crucial, as it remains one of the people's top concerns in the country. One 2019 survey showed that 69 percent of North Macedonian citizens do not believe corruption could be substantially reduced, which adds to the challenge. Addressing this lack of trust in institutions requires comprehensive action and inclusiveness. While mapping partners and stakeholders in the country is part of this process, USAID-led activities within the strategy need to be well-coordinated with already present U.S. and non-U.S. donors and local civil society. This coordination is essential for preventing an overlap of funds and efforts, as well as to build a shared narrative on the expected aim of the various streams of assistance.

The mapping of efforts, vulnerable areas, and final beneficiaries of U.S. assistance programs must be inclusive and transparent. The United States and other donors collectively must ensure the effective allocation of their assistance so that it increases the capacities of institutions with anti-corruption competencies. Related to this, their coordination also needs to be expanded at the regional level, considering the number of regional initiatives and intergovernmental institutions relevant to the fight against corruption in North Macedonia, such as the Regional Cooperation Council and the Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative.

On the Summit for Democracy

In the context of North Macedonia, the Summit for Democracy's success will depend on how much the commitments are communicated in the national context. The United States needs to work closely with the government to support the follow-up on summit commitments, to operationalize them in the local context, and to embed them in the government's current strategic communication. The summit could aid the democratic narrative in North Macedonia by pointing out the benefits of being part of the demo-

cratic world and what that means for the country's stability and potential for economic development. The summit needs to ensure that relevant actors in the country can provide suggestions as well as monitor and feed the process throughout the whole year.

The United States needs to direct aspects of its assistance policy to the domestic institutions and civil society relevant for the implementation and monitoring of the summit commitments. Activities funded by U.S. assistance should include mapping local processes and beneficiaries important for the summit process. The U.S. embassy can also aid the implementation of the summit commitments by enabling cooperation between institutions, civil society, and journalists in monitoring and evaluation. Engaging with local interlocutors, civil society, and opinion leaders could increase the credibility of the summit commitments and create citizen demand for their implementation. According to their expertise,

local actors must be encouraged and empowered to assess the commitments between the two summits. The summit must provide them a platform and visibility to utilize the leverage and recognition by the event.

As many of the summit commitments will imply international cooperation, the United States could also facilitate cooperation in the Western Balkans while utilizing and supporting already established regional networks of institutions and civil society. Effective regional cooperation is an important aspect in the region, considering the cross-border effects of authoritarianism, economic challenges, and energy dependency that require regional solutions.

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Poland

Anna Wójcik

On Short-term U.S. Support

Poland, one of the staunchest U.S. allies in Europe, is vital for ensuring the border and democratic security of Central and Eastern Europe, and of all member states of the European Union. However, once a champion of democratization and market reforms, it is now the fastest-autocratizing country in the world according to the Varieties of Democracy project. Freedom House reports that Poland has regressed in all key indicators of democracy's quality since 2015: electoral process, rule of law, media freedom and pluralism, local government, civil society, and human rights, especially those of minorities such as LGBT people and women.

The most spectacular decline has been in judicial independence. This has put Poland at loggerheads with the EU institutions. The top EU court and the most important European human rights court have ruled in dozens of cases that the changes introduced in the Polish justice system in recent years violate EU law and the European Convention on Human Rights, the most important international law treaty in Europe. The government has used the politically captured top domestic court to reject these judgments. The European Commission has been considering various financial sanctions against Poland.

Meanwhile, there have been no reversals of the illegal changes to the courts and no meaningful progress toward strengthening the rule of law in the country. The authorities have announced that further changes in the courts, including the Supreme Court, will be implemented. Moreover, attacks against and threats to independent media and civil society critical of government policies have intensified in the last two years.

The time is ripe for the United States to decisively and promptly condemn specific new negative developments in Poland, especially with regard to judicial independence and media freedom, as well as to the country's humanitarian obligations during the migrant crisis on the border with Belarus. President Barack Obama's earlier rhetoric may be used as a template for criticizing the government, but it should be sharpened. Denunciations of specific threats and violations by the U.S. ambassador or, ideally, by President Joe Biden or Vice-president Kamala Harris would have a profound impact in Poland.

At the same time, the United States' assistance policy in the short term should focus on those organizations providing pro bono legal, psychological, and public-relations help to key rule-of-law defenders who are subject to criminal prosecutions, disciplinary proceedings, and other forms of harassment, including smear campaigns on the captured public broadcaster and in the pro-government private media.

On Medium-term U.S. Support

In the medium term, the United States needs to act in tandem with the EU and endorse various efforts by the latter to address the rule-of-law emergency in Poland. The country's current leaders attempt to convince citizens that the EU is weak and alone in criticizing their undemocratic policies. They also seem to constantly forget that also NATO is built on the idea of the rule of law. It is crucial that the United States' diplomacy amplify the voices of top officials in the EU institutions and in European capitals to help contain and eventually reverse the democratic backsliding in Poland.

It is of the utmost importance to regularly remind the government in Warsaw of key democratic values

shared by the United States and Europe. Not acting decisively toward Poland risks spreading the crisis to other parts of the EU, in particular the other post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe.

The United States should also consider targeted sanctions against those individuals responsible for dismantling the rule of law in Poland, including, notably, the president, the prime minister, the deputy prime minister, and the justice minister/prosecutor general and his deputies in the ministry.

This should be backed up with diplomatic pressure, modeled, for example, on the U.S. response to the bill adopted in the lower house of the parliament in August 2021 that bans companies that are majority-owned by entities outside the European Economic Area from owning more than a 49 percent stake in Polish media. It is widely believed that the bill is a politically motivated effort to silence the critical leading private TV broadcaster TVN, which is fully owned by the U.S.-based media Discovery, Inc.

The draft bill has been denounced by the U.S. State Department and members of Congress. Media reported that the United States pressured the government with a threat of relocating some of its troops stationed in Poland to Romania or another NATO member on the Europe's eastern flank. This is a good way to make an impact on the government, which hopes that more U.S. forces will be based in Poland. Continuous and robust action is needed to prevent the bill from being further passed in parliament and signed by the government-aligned President Andrzej Duda. The United States must make it clear that adopting the bill would be an attack on independent media as well as on U.S. investments in Poland, and that it would gravely damage bilateral relations and cooperation in many areas, including security and defense.

Whatever happens, it is highly probable that Poland's current political leadership will continue threatening other outlets by diverse means. It is essential therefore that Washington be prepared to

condemn such moves promptly. A political attack on one media outlet should be opposed as an attack on the free media as a whole. With parliamentary elections due in 2023, or probably earlier, it is essential or even existential for Poland's democracy that the United States emphasize and back the role of independent and pluralistic private and public media in guaranteeing that the elections are not only free but also fair. Washington should also clearly communicate to the government that it will not be silent if any irregularities in the electoral process occur, as it was the case in the parliamentary elections in 2019 and presidential election in 2020, as documented by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

The United States should also demand that all institutions overseeing the electoral process, including the Supreme Court and the National Electoral Commission, are truly independent, unbiased, and non-partisan. This would help restore the public's trust that the next elections will be free and fair. According to a recent poll, almost a third of Poles fears that they will not be. This poses a serious threat to the core institution of democracy and aggravates society's deep and harmful political polarization.

It is essential for the United States to support pro-democratic independent media and civil society organizations in Poland's regions, which face increased political, legal, and economic threats. The aid could be in the form of grants for organizational development rather than for short-term projects, with a multiyear grantmaking facility included in the assistance strategy. Equally important are grants to the mostly Warsaw-based independent media outlets and think tanks to create fellowships of up to 12 months for journalists and analysts based in the country's regions to cover key issues of public interest. This would improve media coverage of the regions and provide opportunities for local talent. In 2021, many journalists in the regions lost their jobs after the government-controlled, state-owned company ORLEN acquired Polska Press holding, which owns several regional dailies.

On the Summit for Democracy

The issue of the independence of the courts and media freedom and pluralism in Poland needs to be addressed at both summits. There is great demand and expectation by Polish pro-democracy civil society that the Biden administration will return to a strongly values-based U.S. foreign policy. Developing linkages between the U.S. embassy in Warsaw and civil society leaders is key. It is also essential to clarify to the Poland's authorities that these are important actors in their conversation with the United States. This is especially urgent as the government policies against outspoken judges, lawyers, and journalists mean these are operating in an increasing hostile environment. Their involvement in the summit will help to enhance their visibility and perhaps protect them from further targeted legal and smear attacks, and other various forms of pressure and intimidation.

It would be highly inappropriate if the summit provided President Duda and the government with an opportunity to present themselves as defenders of democracy and the rule of law. They will be keen to use this event as a unique propaganda opportunity, especially when Hungary has not been invited. They also will surely attempt to focus the discussions on the situation on the border with Belarus, yet they should be reminded at the summit that the United States also demands that the democratic status of Poland be safeguarded.

The summit process should provide an environment in which statements made by Polish officials are immediately confronted with ones by represen-

tatives of civil society. Representatives of associations of judges and prosecutors, the former independent commissioner for human rights, lawyers involved in defending the rule of law, journalists leading the protests against curbing media freedom and pluralism, and human rights activists should be invited to speak at the summit. As much as the online 2021 edition allows and certainly during the 2022 one, it is critical to provide journalists, especially from Polish independent outlets, an opportunity to question President Duda, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, and other members of the Polish government. In recent years, Polish independent media have been denied such opportunities.

In between the summits, civil society organizations should be invited to monitor and evaluate progress or lack thereof regarding any commitments the Polish government makes at the summit. To this end, regular communication between civil society representatives and the U.S. embassy or Washington are key in order to detect any new decline in the key indicators of Poland's democratic performance: the rule of law, media freedom and pluralism, respect for international humanitarian law in regard to migration crisis on the border with Belarus, and human rights.

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Romania

Clara Volintiru

On Short-term U.S. Support

During the coronavirus pandemic, the link between the quality of democracy and the quality of governance has been questioned. Political opportunists have claimed there is a tension between executive efficiency and the legitimacy provided by strong checks and balances. In Romania, the pandemic has overlapped with a prolonged political crisis, leading to growing disengagement by the government from long-term reforms to strengthen institutional capacity and to promote the rule of law as part of the good governance agenda. As elsewhere, it has instead pursued short-term goals, focusing narrowly on domestic political competition and its survival in office, rather than on the severe challenges and vulnerabilities of Romanian society.

While the democratic process has not been affected in terms of representation, it has been in terms of accountability mechanisms and policy outcomes. Therefore, the U.S. democracy agenda with Romania must target the rule of law and its impact on the quality of life of citizens. The risk in not doing so is that the electoral backlash from the poor management of the current health and energy crisis will lead to over-representation of extremist political forces whose current poll ratings are rising. Still, with no more than a year since the last general elections, and the collapse of the government in September, mainstream political actors are currently trying to form a broad ruling coalition.

In the coming year, it is important for the United States to strengthen its normative and declarative support for the rule of law and the fight against corruption within the framework of its strategic partnership with Romania. Reaffirming in bilateral talks its commitment to supporting the country's reform path can limit domestic backsliding in various fields—

from politicization of the judiciary to improprieties in public procurement. For example, the coalition government was dissolved following allegations of the use of public funds to finance party organizational interests in the context of elections. The pandemic created a context propitious for governmental aggrandizement and more politicization of resources and decision-making. This led to greater fragility of the government as its actions generated a strong backlash from opposition and small coalition partners, leading to a prolonged political crisis. These events show the slippery slope created by downgrading the procedural commitment to rule of law and substantive reforms for good governance.

What is more, the benefits of U.S.-Romanian cooperation have not been very well showcased to society by domestic political actors. The previous deputy prime minister even claimed that the United States was “effectively retreating from the region.” As the current president and prime minister remain heavily focused on their political survival or future appointments, Romania's orientation toward democracy and the rule of law has been sidelined and no longer actively included in the public agenda. The U.S.-Romanian strategic partnership is predominantly anchored in security, and little attention is given to the alignment of shared values and to socioeconomic ties. To counter this, the United States needs to support through diplomatic channels broader societal conversations in Romania to boost citizens' trust in society and quality of democracy.

At the same time, U.S. assistance to Romania could focus in the short term on financing evidence-based assessments of hybrid threats in the country and the nexus between disinformation and the crises the country is grappling with, as there is a limited under-

standing of the mechanisms of engagement between foreign and domestic disruption agents. Rising inequality and large-scale disinformation campaigns create fertile ground for new extremist actors, whose electoral mobilization strategies can be linked to Russian influence, to perform well in the next elections.

Politics at the local level is particularly at risk in this regard, with national actors having a poor overview of the vulnerabilities and capabilities there. For example, the national authorities do not really understand what the explanation is for the lower vaccination rates outside of Bucharest and the part disinformation might play in lowering trust. In another example, poor budgetary capacity means many local governments still rely on Chinese-made technology despite national moves toward banning Huawei from the national 5G network. Finally, with the severe impact of recent spikes in energy prices and the poor capacity of the healthcare system to provide adequate services during the pandemic, citizens' distrust in the authorities and disenchantment will only grow.

In this context, the United States can actively support the democratic resilience of Romania in the coming months by funding the diagnosis of, and a policy dialogue on, local-level vulnerabilities to hybrid threats and disinformation, so that targeted, effective measures to counter the negative impact of the overlapping crises Romania faces can be implemented.

On Medium-term U.S. Support

Over the next few years, the United States should reaffirm its commitment to an economic partnership with Romania in key strategic sectors as part of its security agenda in the region. As the rising energy prices drive large parts of the population toward the poverty threshold, and with the poor state of the healthcare system leading to an extremely high number of preventable deaths, there is a deep structural need for targeted investments in these sectors. Without coordinated, large-scale efforts to address the structural vulnerabilities in the energy and healthcare sectors, or to provide new business and employment opportuni-

ties fit for the new economy, inequalities will produce uncontrollable social tensions. These could lead to electoral outcomes that might disrupt the country's European and transatlantic integration path.

The recent agreement for the United States to provide Romania with the innovative nuclear technology to build a small modular reactor is an example of the economic engagement that it should deploy to address the most immediate crises in the country. However, larger efforts in other key sectors are also needed and would benefit from a comprehensive, systematic dialogue with Romania's authorities through private-sector bodies such as AmCham. While there are extensive investment opportunities for public- and private-sector entities within the current EU financial instruments, there is a knowledge and capacity gap in Romania that can prevent it from deploying truly transformative investment projects. U.S. companies could contribute to its development and economic resilience by entering the market or by enhancing their current investments in key strategic sectors such as healthcare, green energy, and infrastructure. Additionally, the bilateral relationship could also develop a dialogue on business innovation and internationalization. Support for higher-value-added production in Romania, backed with access to the U.S. market, is a central element of the future stability of the economy given the rising poverty effects of the green transition in a country that is caught in the middle-income trap.

In the medium term, one important way in which the United States could have an impact in Romania is by targeting its assistance to strengthening domestic actors—such as civil society organizations (CSOs), academia, and the media—to monitor and design new innovative tools to address domestic or Russian-backed disinformation campaigns. With the growing penetration of these through new online environments or through grassroots networks, traditional public-information campaigns yield few results. Recent polls show more Romanians believe the EU is more responsible for propaganda and disinformation than Russia. Furthermore, the country's very low vaccination rate

that has destabilized society—for example, in terms of public trust—and public services, especially in health-care and education, are linked to coordinated disinformation campaigns online and offline.

U.S. assistance should support new and innovative approaches to counter these campaigns. Here, there is greater vulnerability at the local level in smaller cities or rural areas. But attention should also be given to generational patterns, with younger generations becoming more vulnerable than before to disinformation. Academic actors have the analytical capacity to develop new assessment tools. For example, the Ministry of External Affairs is developing its new strategy to increase resilience in the face of disinformation and hybrid threats in partnership with one of the country's universities, while the Emergency Services Department is implementing a behavioral assessment on social trust and resistance to vaccination with contributions by leading academics. More such partnerships could yield better, adapted mechanisms to strengthen societal resilience to disinformation and destabilization in times of crisis. In support of this, the United States could facilitate a dedicated stream of knowledge exchanges between U.S. and Romanian universities on societal resilience. This would help consolidate national knowledge and expertise on current threats to democracy, and it would contribute to the development of an expert pool supporting the Euro-Atlantic Centre for Resilience—a new initiative under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that could have an important regional impact.

On the Summit for Democracy

The Summit for Democracy offers an important opportunity for renewed action and commitments in support of democratic resilience. Romania's government could lead by example in a troubled region by offering as a commitment a concrete national engagement. It could develop with civil society partners a domestic action plan for a National Program of Democratic Consolidation to tackle the current challenges to democracy—for example, disinforma-

tion, rising inequalities and poor representation of interests, clientelism, poor accountability mechanisms regarding public expenditure and policymaking. This National Program of Democratic Consolidation should target internal and external threats to democracy in Romania. It could be implemented at the level of the national government or of the president's office.

The program could include such actions as: mapping major threats to democracy; identifying leading priority measures to strengthen democratic resilience as part of existing governmental programs and reforms; establishing annual priorities; monitoring and evaluating progress achieved in key areas of democratic resilience as defined by national experts; developing a broad societal dialogue on what democracy means for Romania and how democratic values are foundational for general welfare, good governance and development; and integrating the democratic consolidation process in the work of the Euro-Atlantic Centre for Resilience.

Civil society has played an important part in mitigating the effects of the pandemic in Romania through engagement at local level with the public sector, providing a compensatory function. This confirmed that civic actors should be included in implementing a program of democratic consolidation, not just as key agents of monitoring, but also as partners in the formulation of priorities and reforms.

While the EU has provided over the years valuable benchmarks for assessing progress and regress with regard to democracy and the rule of law in Romania, there is a need for more sophisticated, proactive engagement at the national and local level. The Summit for Democracy can provide a formal context and an important diplomatic incentive for the launch of a broad stakeholder engagement process and the development of a new agenda to revitalize Romanian democracy.

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Russia

Vladimir Milov

On Short-term U.S. Support

Above all, the United States should stop the attempts to “reset relations” or to establish a “strategic stability dialogue” with the Russian dictatorship. The damage from attempts to work in this way with President Vladimir Putin, while overlooking his malign activities at home and abroad, is enormous, and the gains questionable at best. First, this strongly demoralizes Russia’s democratic forces. In the current environment when political and civil liberties are almost totally destroyed in Russia, the position of the United States and the West is extremely important to help maintain the morale of the country’s democratic forces. Doing so in times of brutal repression is crucial for further attempts to regain the initiative and bring about democratic changes in Russia. Second, it encourages and emboldens Putin to continue domestic repression. For example, following the summit meeting with President Joe Biden in Geneva in June 2021, Putin intensified repression, with the United States unable to exert influence in any way. Third, it sidelines key strategic issues that guarantee stability in the long run. Democracy is a better guarantor of peace and security than deals with dictators. Depriving Russia of a chance to return to democratic governance is more strategically threatening to the United States than lack of dialogue with Putin. Russia’s dictatorship will continue to generate new threats because it is not contained by democratic checks domestically.

The need for dialogue with Putin on global issues is understandable, but this requires that the United States adheres to simple principles. Dialogue should be conditioned on progress in democracy and human rights in Russia. No steps should be taken that look like one-way concessions from the West. And, if no

such progress is achieved, the United States should keep dialogue at a technical minimum, and not allow Putin space to interpret it as a political victory over a “pragmatic and cynical West.” Essentially, the United States showing that its declared principles really mean something and that it will not engage in another reputation-destroying “reset” would be a tremendously emboldening factor for the democratic forces in Russia. There would be little need for any specific U.S. policy beyond that; Russia’s democrats will do the rest by themselves.

For as long as Putin’s aim is the near-total destruction of any even remotely independent civic and political activity in Russia, the most important tool for influencing and mobilizing the country’s population will remain independent broadcasting from abroad. Unlike the Western radio “voices” of the 1970s and 1980s, this is now done by Russians who are well known and respected in the country, and who aim to return to it when the situation permits. These Russian voices from abroad are great professionals—journalists, civil activists, politicians, experts in different areas—all with high popularity and audience ratings. They are developing new, effective ways to continue to reach a mass audience in Russia, despite the current highly constrained circumstances, and they are meeting with great interest and demand in the country.

The aim of U.S. assistance for democratic progress in Russia should be to increase the reach of these information channels to ordinary Russians as an alternative to state propaganda, from an estimated current peak of 10–15 million citizens to tens of millions. This can be supported in various important ways. Financial and technical assistance can target enhancing the quality and reach of the most effective existing independent

Russian social-media projects (independent media, political blogs and channels, investigative journalism, civil society groups) by helping them improve their production quality and content. U.S. assistance can also play an important role in developing advanced technological approaches to reach audiences in Russia, circumventing the regime's attempts to shut down or block undesired free public platforms and products. The global tech corporations can be engaged to help them develop approaches against attempts to shut them down in Russia as in other autocratic countries. The United States can also provide legal and other assistance to tech companies to combat pressure from the Russian government, while at the same time demanding full transparency in their interaction with it. Finally, U.S. programs can help the Russian diaspora in democratic countries to better organize and develop the means for direct people-to-people communication with their contacts in Russia.

On Medium-term U.S. Support

Dismantling the link between the ruling kleptocrats in Russia and the Western financial system should be the priority for the United States in the medium term when it comes to supporting democracy. Asia is no alternative for Russian kleptocrats and oligarchs because they do not believe they are protected there to the same extent as in the United States and the West by the rule of law, independent judiciaries, and other institutions. The United States and other Western countries must send a clear signal to Putin and the kleptocratic elite in Russia that they will no longer be able to use democratic countries' systems and rule of law to safeguard their stolen capital as well as to enjoy life in the West while ordinary Russians continue to suffer.

This illicit financial connection should be broken once and for all. One way to do so is for the United States to sanction the oligarchs who channel stolen and dirty money out of Russia and into buying assets and influence in the West. It needs to adopt higher standards of transparency and regulatory scrutiny of Russian investments in the country through acquisi-

tions of real estate, private equity firms, and offshore companies. The model of unexplained wealth orders in the United Kingdom is one that can be used to block the assets of individual connected to the Russian regime until they properly account for the origin of their wealth. This model should be improved upon significantly, though, as it relies too much on the explanations provided by such individuals and their good will, making it harder to challenge their version of the origin of their wealth.

U.S. assistance policy in the medium term should, just as in the short term, aim to enhance the capabilities of "free Russia broadcasting" and broaden their reach in the country, with the eventual goal for them to overtake state propaganda in terms of audience. The more pluralistic environment the Internet still offers, despite regime efforts to shut down this space too, opportunities to challenge official propaganda in Russia, even if many Internet users are not necessarily supportive of the opposition. According to the Levada Center, the share of Russians having state-controlled television as their major source of information dropped from over 90 percent in early 2014 to just over 60 percent earlier this year, whereas those getting their information mainly from the Internet increased to almost 40 percent. If this trend can be accelerated, the Internet can overtake television as the main source of information for Russians by the time Putin is expected to extend again his stay in power in 2024. U.S. assistance efforts in this regard should include social and cultural dimensions, actively working with the diaspora so that it engages more in supporting democratic changes, and helping international tech companies to protect their operations, products, and technologies against pressure from the Russian regime.

On the Summit for Democracy

The Summit for Democracy in December offers an opportunity for the world's major democracies to establish a coordinating mechanism for joint action against the malicious activities of Russia's autocratic regimes and others like it. Measures in support of civil

society in autocratic countries and against the malign foreign activities of dictatorial regimes are most effective when coordinated between the United States, the EU countries, and their democratic peers. Various groups of policymakers in these countries already work on many issues that are vital for democracy to thrive around the world, but they still usually do so in parallel. Permanent cooperation among themselves as well as coordination or alignment of the measures they introduce at the national level can be effective for supporting civil society, independent broadcasting, and free information in Russia and other oppressed societies; for supporting educational projects about democratic self-organization, self-governance, and the best institutional and policy practices of democratic countries; and for more effective sanctions against autocracies and measures against kleptocracy and flows of dirty money. The more substantial democratic multilateralism that should come out of

the summit could also play a crucial role in preventing autocratic regimes like Russia's from gaining access to potentially oppressive technologies—from public surveillance to hacking tools and policing hardware—originating in democratic countries, as well as in creating international justice mechanisms that citizens of Russia and other oppressed countries can resort to for redress against abuses committed by their governments. Finally, one important contribution that the process for the two Summits for Democracy and the year of action between them ought to make is a serious effort to advance an international legal norm for the “right to assist” democratic forces in oppressed societies, in opposition to concept of “full autocratic sovereignty” promoted by the Kremlin and other autocratic regimes.

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Serbia

Bojan Elek

On Short-term U.S. Support

The United States' policy toward Serbia, and the wider region, should overcome challenges that have nothing to do with lack of capabilities, but lack of commitment. The executive order signed by President Joe Biden in June aiming to “sanction persons involved in destabilizing the Western Balkans” seems like the deployment of the nuclear option in the U.S. foreign policy toolbox. Moreover, the appointment of heavy-weight diplomats such as Christopher Hill as ambassador in Belgrade, James O'Brien as State Department sanctions coordinator, and Gabriel Escobar as envoy for the Western Balkans and dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo leave no doubt that Washington can deliver. It is a common belief in the region that the United States is the only actor that can deliver, with the EU increasingly seen as lacking any transformative potential due to its internal challenges. However, the question of commitment looms large, leaving many wondering what the ultimate goal of the U.S. diplomatic offensive is. The main concern is whether this apparent increased engagement with Serbia and the region has more to do with protecting U.S. interests (for example, countering the influence of China and Russia, or forcing a deal with Kosovo) or whether it will be used for much more pressing needs such as helping democratizing actors to counter increasing authoritarian pressures.

To demonstrate a renewed commitment to helping Serbia transform itself in the right direction, the United States should urgently focus on creating an environment conducive for the elections that will take place in the spring of 2022 to be free and fair. After the failed attempts of by members of the European Parliament to mediate between the

ruling and opposition parties to reach an agreement on electoral reforms, it appears that Serbia is heading again toward elections that will not meet minimum democratic standards. Today, more than 90 percent of members of the parliament support the ruling coalition and, save for the representatives of ethnic minorities, there is virtually no opposition. This means that the United States should communicate in no uncertain terms to the government that it will closely monitor the coming elections and that their outcome will be a major factor for future relations. This should be coupled with requests for urgent measures to be taken to assure a level playing field for all political actors. A good starting point are the outstanding recommendations of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe made after the last elections in 2020. Particular attention should be paid to preventing pressure on voters and sanctioning those responsible in any identified cases, measures to prevent abuse of office and state resources during the campaign, and ensuring fair coverage in the national media through the work of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media.

In the same vein, the United States' assistance programs for Serbia should heavily invest in independent election monitoring, independent media reporting, and the work of human rights defenders prior to and during the elections. Media freedom and civic space are under attack and rapidly shrinking and, since the stakes at the coming elections are high, this trend will definitely continue. Due to high polarization in the public sphere, some human rights defenders do not exclude the possibility of

limited outbursts of violence during or immediately after the elections, just like after the last ones in 2020. The United States already backs some Serbian organizations working in this field but it could do so more comprehensively in the coming months, supporting a wider spread of initiatives that can provide robust, independent monitoring of the electoral campaigns and of election day. This support should be coupled with clearer public communication about the importance of free and fair elections from the U.S. government. Moreover, Serbia's independent media outlets and human rights defenders will need assistance also for reporting and providing legal and other services in case of an eruption of election-related violence.

On Medium-term U.S. Support

In the medium term, the United States should focus on addressing the state capture that is rampant across the region and in Serbia is in its most advanced stage. As a first step, Washington must learn from its failed efforts to appease local authoritarian leaders Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia and Milorad Dodik in Republika Srpska. This is a strategy that has never worked anywhere, yet the United States and the international community seem to cling to it. It legitimizes authoritarian leaders who are able to get away with anything, it erodes trust in the United States among Serbia's citizens, and it opens up space for other international actors to exert malign influence in the country due to its perceived weakness. Washington should instead use its renewed engagement in the region to steer Serbia toward its proclaimed goals of EU membership, economic prosperity, and democratic development. Special Envoy Escobar speaking at the Belgrade Security Forum mentioned that the Biden administration wants to bring greater urgency to U.S. efforts at resolving outstanding issues and that this should be achieved in partnership with governments in the region, rather than through pressure or sanctions. However, although it should refrain from involving itself in a change of government, which it has been

accused of recently in Kosovo, the United States should make it clear that it will be ready to introduce a new sanctions regime as a last-resort measure to achieve democratization goals.

To address state capture in Serbia, just as in other countries of the region, the United States must establish itself as a partner to citizens rather than the corrupt political elites that have been running the show for decades. This requires publicly and directly pointing to democratic backsliding and calling out those responsible for it. One good example of this was the U.S. embassy in Serbia standing up last year in defense of civil society organizations that had been illegally targeted by the Serbian anti-money laundering authorities. It also means identifying and supporting local partners that can help in the process of reversing state capture: professional associations that raise their voice against illegal government actions, human rights defenders who provide support to civil activists suffering from abuses by state or political actors, and those actors like independent media that help expose corruption and other wrongdoings related to state capture.

At the heart of state capture in Serbia is the almost absolute political control over scarce economic resources, jobs, and finance. U.S. assistance over the coming years should therefore aim at enabling the creation of economic opportunities for citizens and promoting free enterprise in the country. This would offer them viable alternatives to the politically controlled public sector. In doing so, the United States should rely on existing capacities; for example, providing financial assistance to small and medium-sized enterprises through the Development Finance Corporation. To capitalize on the generally positive economic trends in the region, it should also consider creating a more comprehensive development plan for the Western Balkans. This should be complementary to the EU's Economic Investment Plan that aims to deploy €30 billion in the coming years and focuses on key sectors of economy with growth potential, such as the creative industries, and with high societal importance, such as green transition.

On the Summit for Democracy

One century after Woodrow Wilson proclaimed that the goal of the United States was to “make the world safe for democracy,” the administration of President Biden face similar threats when it comes democracy throughout the world—and at home. At the same time, U.S. citizens give democracy promotion abroad a low position among their country’s foreign policy priorities, if any at all. Therefore, the Summit for Democracy must address the critical juncture of the erosion of trust in liberal democracy at home and the challenges coming from authoritarian states. Serbia is among the latter and it comes as a surprise that it received an invitation to the summit, despite initial reports that it would not be invited.

Any follow-up from the summit will depend on exactly what commitments the participating countries make in December. These should be few and concrete, avoiding the usual lip service to vague democratic values and freedoms. The commitments should be action-focused, measurable, and achievable within a limited timeframe, focusing on specific challenges within each of the countries. Civil society should be made an integral part of the process as it is the key element of democracy that has proved most resilient during the backsliding over the last decade. This requires not just invitations to both summits for civil society organizations, but also ensuring they have a genuine role in assessing whether the commitments made by governments are implemented. Therefore, one of the outcomes of the first summit could

be a mutual checklist of concrete, context-sensitive commitments that governments and CSOs can track in the run-up to the second summit.

In the medium to long term, whether the summit delivers on its ambitions will be observed in how many countries move toward being more consolidated democracies or halt their slide away from this goal, like Serbia, which Freedom House’s *Nations in Transit* demoted to the status of hybrid regime last year. Although such indices are not very time-sensitive and could not directly track the impact of the summit, they can provide a sense of whether things are moving in the right direction in the coming years.

The key areas in which Serbia’s government is likely to make commitments are well-known; the question is not getting them on the agenda but making sure it delivers. They are ensuring a better functioning parliament that is representative of the existing political division in the country as a direct consequence of the coming elections; creating conditions for more independent and professional media reporting, particularly by the national Radio Television of Serbia; and reversing the trend of shrinking civic space and creating an environment conducive for national dialogue, which is currently marred by threats, pressures and attacks by actors connected to the ruling coalition.

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Slovakia

Pavol Demeš

On Short-term U.S. Support

After the Velvet revolution in 1989 and the peaceful split of Czechoslovakia in 1993, the United States played a key role in Slovakia's democratic transition, state-building, and integration into NATO and the European Union. Today, it remains a key political, economic, and military partner for the country. However, the image of the United States as the world's democratic leader deteriorated significantly over the last few years, due to its internal developments, particularly connected with the performance of Donald Trump and his supporters on the political stage, and Russian hybrid operations. The U.S.-led world order is being questioned and there is serious backlash against liberalism in Slovakia.

As the competition for influence between the United States, Russia, and China intensifies, Slovakia—like other countries on the eastern flank of NATO and the EU—are at the crossroad where this contest plays out. It is particularly vulnerable to misinformation, conspiracy theories, and Russian propaganda via social media and networks, which results in shifts in the views of citizens on politics, geopolitics, and now the coronavirus pandemic. Polls have found that more Slovaks view the United States as a threat than as a strategic partner. Surprisingly, Russia finds a sympathetic audience with about half of poll respondents identifying it as a strategic partner and viewing President Vladimir Putin positively. This could suggest that Slovakia is gradually turning away from the West, but this is not the case. Paradoxically, according to the GLOBSEC Trends survey, it holds the distinction of being the only country in the region to record rising support for a pro-Western orientation, including for EU and

NATO membership, since 2017. This presents an opportunity for creativity on the part of the United States to prepare new approaches in its relations with Slovakia.

In recent times, Slovakia has been going through an unprecedented period of political tension, fragmentation, and growing public mistrust of political elites and the judiciary. Protest politics is rising steadily, putting the governing center-right coalition in a difficult situation. Although European solidarity and financial support within the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility are key for the country to cope with these unfavorable political trends, the role of United States and renewed transatlantic cooperation is also crucial. In this regard, it is promising that the Biden administration includes several individuals with knowledge of the democracy assistance agenda and of Central and Eastern Europe.

The new circumstances and challenges of the digital-communication era require new partnerships and mutual learning for effective action. In the short term, it would be of great help to the democracy situation in Slovakia if the U.S. embassy in Bratislava, in cooperation with the likes of the National Endowment for Democracy, the National Democratic Institute, and the International Republican Institute, and other public and private entities, would develop in 2022 a scheme of flexible financial and expert support to democratic civil society actors dealing with civic education and the massive spread of disinformation and propaganda against Western values. Besides providing assistance to these actors, this would improve the image of the United States in the country and strengthen its under-developed public diplomacy and strategic communication there. This could also

help Slovakia become again a country that can share its lessons with other countries aiming to reclaim or build democracy, including through the state's SlovakAid agency.

On Medium-term U.S. Support

If the United States wants to increase its standing in Central and Eastern Europe and to help the region overcome its growing democratic deficit, this requires in-depth and differentiated analysis of sociopolitical trends in the different countries. In Slovakia, analysts expect that the country's societal course and position in the democratic family will be defined in the next few years. If there is no successful effort to overcome the current deep crisis of governance, the steady radicalization of political life, and the growing mistrust of people in liberal democracy, the country could see the reemergence of an authoritarian, corrupt model of politics, coupled with enhanced nationalism and populism. In this delicate moment, Slovakia should have a special place in the United States' regional democracy agenda, which should also be connected with the efforts of EU and local public and private pro-democracy actors.

Slovakia still has democrats in power, an ambitious civil society, and free media actors that are not silenced, unlike, say, in neighboring Hungary. But it desperately needs to develop a new generation of politicians and civic leaders with the ambition and skills to have an impact on the democratic process. Young political leaders do not have proper training opportunities to learn the job. Without them, it is harder to have solid political parties that adhere to the constitution and the principles of open, participative governance democracy in Slovakia will deteriorate. Likewise, emerging civic activists and nongovernmental organizations professionals need to have effective training programs through which they can learn the skills for managing their activities or organizations, communicating with citizens, and keeping those in power accountable. They also need to compete with the massive growth of anti-Western

nongovernmental organizations that effectively use social networks and radical methods.

With its worldwide experience in development assistance for political parties and civil society, the United States, in cooperation with European partners, could be of great help in setting up sustainable programs involving local educational institutions and nongovernmental organizations in this field in Slovakia. One positive example that can be emulated is the recently created the European Democracy Youth Network, which aims to support young pro-democracy activists, politicians, and journalists, in Central and Eastern Europe. This entity funded by the United States opened its regional office in Bratislava in 2020.

On the Summit for Democracy

President Joe Biden convening a Summit for Democracy in December 2021 comes at the right time for the United States and Europe. The democratic West has serious questions to deal with, and the historical achievement of a Europe whole, free, and at peace, with Central Europe an integral part of it, is again in play. Moreover, the United States is struggling with its own democratic situation, marked by significant radicalization and polarization.

President Zuzana Čaputová, who has a civil society and human rights background, and is the most trusted political figure in country, will be a good representative of Slovakia at the summit. No doubt, she will openly articulate the ongoing dilemmas of the country's transition and point to the necessary steps to resolve local, regional, and global challenges of democracy. However, her commitments will only come true if she is empowered by the leaders of the United States and other democratic partners, and backed by the weight of summit commitments by Slovakia's government and by the United States and others. This could then enable the initiation in the country of a public-private democracy implementation group, which would divide operational roles and set clear benchmarks.

The results of this group's work should be evaluated quarterly before the follow-up summit in December 2022. Slovakia, like several other countries in the region and worldwide, does not have the luxury of not fixing soon the accumulated acute problems with democracy in its society if it wants to

avoid the emergence of an inefficient and illiberal regime.

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Ukraine

Anna Melenchuk

On Short-term U.S. Support

Ukraine has been a very hot topic for U.S. foreign policy in the last few years. For instance, the scandal sparked by President Donald Trump's phone conversation with Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky was certainly a key moment in the 2020 U.S. presidential election campaign. The United States has also provided strong military support to Ukraine, including the Biden administration's recently announced aid package, and its policy of material and financial support to Ukraine has been quite effective.

Yet, the general feeling in Ukraine is that relations between the two countries can be strengthened further, especially at the diplomatic level. Regarding the ongoing conflict in the eastern part of the country, Ukraine has experienced in the last two years the failure of the Minsk II protocols and the Normandy Format (which has not been properly restored after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic). This means that the government has been essentially left alone in the negotiations with Russia. The most immediate support the United States can provide Ukraine should be in unblocking the diplomatic process for finding the solution to the conflict in Donbas and for restoring the country's territorial integrity. Washington is the only actor with enough political leverage to foster a solutions-based diplomatic discussion between Kyiv and Moscow, and possibly also to create a new forum in which stakeholders can try to resolve the war in Donbas. Thus, what Ukraine needs the most now is stronger direct diplomatic support from the United States in the negotiations with Russia.

In this context, the United States should also provide urgent support to Ukrainian civil society

organizations (CSOs) and media that work on supporting the conflict-affected population as well as on recovery, development, and peacebuilding and monitoring human rights violations in the temporarily occupied territories of eastern Ukraine. In September, President Joe Biden announced more than \$45 million in humanitarian assistance to Ukraine to support people impacted by the ongoing conflict and the coronavirus pandemic. What is especially needed in the short term is development assistance for local businesses and small and medium-sized enterprises that create jobs and provide services to communities in eastern Ukraine. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, many of these businesses had to close or reduce their staff while government assistance was nonexistent. Short-term assistance from the United States could be in the form of grants and capacity-building initiatives that support competitive, sustainable business models for local businesses and small and medium-sized enterprises in the conflict-affected part of the region.

On Medium-term U.S. Support

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on economic growth has been quite significant around the world, and Ukraine is no exception. Statistics from the National Bank of Ukraine show a decline in real GDP of 4 percent in 2020, compared with pre-pandemic estimates of 3.5 percent growth. The fragile economy has also been challenged by the global increase in gas prices and by Russia's refusal to increase its gas exports through Ukraine. With the completion of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline to Germany via the Baltic Sea, Russia's gas transit to Europe could bypass Ukraine. However, the transit of Russian gas is a major income

source for Ukraine and an important non-military deterrent to Russia's military aggression in eastern Ukraine. The next three years will therefore be particularly challenging as the government will need to invest a lot of resources to counteract the sharp drop in trade and investment. Therefore, in its relations with the country, the United States should prioritize expanding commercial cooperation, increasing bilateral trade, and supporting investment in Ukraine. For example, U.S. investments and support could focus on the very dynamic information technology sector. With an exports growth of 20.4 percent in 2020, Ukraine's IT industry has a good chance to partially make up for the general decrease of GDP during the pandemic.

Alongside this stronger economic involvement, the United States should keep up its efforts to help strengthen democratic institutions, independent media, and CSOs in Ukraine. These remain key areas in which external support is crucial for realizing the aspirations of Ukrainians to live in a democratic country under the rule of law. With stronger U.S. assistance in these areas, Ukraine can effectively pursue its reform agenda and transform itself in line with European and Euro-Atlantic principles and practices.

In the medium term, U.S. assistance to Ukraine should focus more on institutional and financial support to CSOs, especially to those recently established and lacking in resources. While CSOs working in areas such as human-rights protection, rule of law, public-administration reforms, and media freedom are doing an excellent job implementing projects, they often lack full-time staff as well as institutional and administrative capacities to work independently and continuously on issues that go beyond specific short-term projects. In this regard, particular attention should be paid to new CSOs operating in digital transformation and cyber security. Due to the ongoing, fast-paced digital-transformation reforms and the introduction of Diia—one of the world's first mobile appli-

cations offering public e-services to citizens—there are very few CSOs that play a watchdog role over the government regarding the protection of digital human rights and cyber security.

On the Summit for Democracy

The Summit for Democracy is a unique occasion for the governments of Ukraine and the United States to reflect on past relations and start planning a new, revised partnership based on stronger diplomatic ties, mutual assistance, and stronger support for Ukrainian civil society. It is very important that the summit should not become just another platform for political declarations and promises. During it, the governments of Ukraine and its major partners—not least the United States—should commit to clear actions and support for concrete initiatives and programs that benefit the country's democratic development. Civil society should also be included in the negotiations, not only by participating in side events but also by having a seat at the main table. This will need to be ensured beyond what happens in December 2021 and be implemented in the run-up to the 2022 summit.

Many prominent CSOs from Ukraine, like their peers worldwide, have proven to be very effective in addressing key global, national, and local issues that affect democratic development. And global CSOs networks and civic engagement have been increasingly important in tackling systemic developments that affect democracy, from climate change to digitalization. Beyond the December summit, it is therefore important to increase opportunities for CSOs from Ukraine to engage with global leaders and international institutions, not only during international fora for democracy but also during working groups and ministerial meetings. In this spirit, Ukrainian CSOs, alongside their global peers, must be plugged into any processes playing out between the two summits.

Overall, it is crucial that the United States promote a new approach vis-à-vis civil society and encourage

governments, including Ukraine's, to be more attentive to CSOs in domestic and international politics. The two summits for democracy and the period between them can be a very good opportunity for Washington to set an example by involving governments and CSOs as equals and to develop a joint

roadmap on securing human rights and democracy worldwide.

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