

## The Origins of Atlanticism in Central and Eastern Europe

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**Abstract** *This article argues that the Atlanticism of Central and Eastern Europe originates in a specific set of historical experiences these countries have had with the United States over the past century. These include the Central and East European encounter with both Nazi and communist totalitarian regimes; a recognition of the leading role the US played in toppling communism and in facilitating the integration of these countries into Euro-Atlantic institutions; and the strategic calculation of many countries in the region that their national interests in Europe are better preserved via active American engagement that balances the influence of other major European powers.*

At a conference of Euro-Atlantic intellectuals on the margins of the Prague 2002 NATO summit that officially sanctioned the so-called 'Big Bang' round of enlargement that embraced seven Central and East European countries stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea, the British writer Timothy Garton Ash punctuated the air of celebration in the room by asking his assembled colleagues the following question: did we believe that the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, having just received invitations to join the Alliance and so proud of their pro-American orientation, would still be Atlanticist in ten years' time? Or would the countries of the region—with the possible exception of Poland—succumb to the wave of radical chic anti-American Euro-Gaullist sentiments on the rise in the western half of the continent (Ash 2002)?

In this article, we seek to address the question of how enduring the current Atlanticism of Central and Eastern Europe is likely to be and why. We do so by examining the historical origins of Atlanticist views in Central and Eastern Europe and inquire about their longer-term viability. Are they a temporary phenomenon that will pass as these countries integrate themselves into the European Union—a modern-day version of Lenin's infamous 'infantile disorder'? Or will they prove to be more deeply rooted in history and national interest so that they will turn out to be more durable and an important part of the outlook of this region and the face of modern-day Europe?

To be sure, it is a mistake to talk about Central and Eastern Europe as if it is a monolithic region or set of countries, including or especially when it comes to relations with the United States and the European Union. There clearly is a spectrum of views across the region. The two largest states in the region—Poland and Romania—are staunchly Atlanticist, as are the Baltic states. In countries like the Czech Republic or Slovakia, the elites are clearly Atlanticist whereas the publics are less so. The same is largely true in Hungary and Bulgaria. Slovenia is

clearly an exception. At the same time, we believe there is a certain centre of gravity in the region on these issues that allows us to speak of it as a whole. Given the constraint of space in this article, we ask for the reader's indulgence if we, for reasons of space and time, occasionally generalise about this region to make a broader point and don't always fully capture nuances that exist on the ground.

Our thesis is that the Atlanticism of Central and Eastern Europe is rooted in history, national strategic interests and genuine and recent real-world experience. While these factors are certainly not immutable factors, they are very real and likely to be durable for some time to come. They spring from a very specific set of historical experiences these countries have had with the United States over the past century, the Central and East European encounter with both Nazi and communist totalitarian regimes, a recognition of the leading role the US played in toppling communism and in facilitating the integration of these countries into Euro-Atlantic institutions, and the strategic calculation of many countries in the region that their national interests in Europe are better preserved via active American engagement that balances the influence of other major European powers such as France, Germany or Russia.

As scholars and government officials personally involved on both sides of the Atlantic in the debate over these issues since the collapse of communism, we have seen first-hand how the countries of this region have wrestled with the issue of their future Atlantic and European vocations. We are convinced that the Atlanticism of these countries is not only rooted in history and in the past. Equally important, when Central and East Europeans think about the future, there is a widespread view that they will be better off facing the problems confronting the West—be it radical Islamism, international terrorism or proliferation of weapons of mass destruction—with a close cooperative relationship with America than without one. In this article, we propose to examine the historical and contemporary roots of Atlanticism in the region as well as the factors likely to shape future attitudes in these countries.

### **The Historical Roots of Atlanticism and the Collapse of Communism**

The countries of Central and Eastern Europe, wedged between Germany and Russia, have had differing national experiences with the fate of geography and living next to their various larger and more powerful European neighbours to the East as well as the West. Some countries tried to escape the dilemmas inherited from history and geography by opposing Germany and others by allying with it. Others turned to Russia, France or the United Kingdom—or various combinations of the above. Some tried both strategies—and failed. Few corners of Europe have found themselves the focal points of geopolitical intrigue, war and invasion routes and the resulting violence and destruction as much as the medium-sized and small countries of this region.

But if there is one largely positive historical experience the region has in common, it has been with the United States. That positive experience stands in sharp contrast not only to their turbulent history with former adversaries such as Russia and Germany—but also to their disappointing historical experiences with other leading Western powers such as France and the United Kingdom. In the eyes of most Central and East Europeans, the United States is the one major Western

power that has never constituted a threat to any of them. On the contrary, it is a country that was central in the creation of many of these states—as well as their liberation from, initially, Nazi empire and, subsequently, Soviet-dominated communist rule. It is widely seen as a benign and largely altruistic power (albeit at times an inconsistent and somewhat naïve one). The independence and very existence of Central and Eastern Europe as we know it today, was largely created out of the ruins of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of World War I, and is attributable to American power, diplomacy and the idealism of President Woodrow Wilson.

Nowhere is this truer than in a country like former Czechoslovakia. Without Woodrow Wilson's idealism and activism, Czechoslovakia would never have gained its independence, at least not in 1918. American values and ideals were a key inspiration for several Central and East European constitutions. Thomas Masaryk, the founder of modern Czechoslovakia, frequently visited the US, married an American and regarded the US both as a spiritual force and as an important and perspective protector of smaller oppressed European nations in their fights against ancient regimes.<sup>1</sup> It was with greater regret and trepidation that Central European leaders and diplomats watched America's withdrawal from European politics in the 1930s, leaving them to largely fend for themselves against the backdrop of depression, rising nationalism and predatory geopolitics. In Central European eyes, it was America's retreat from European politics in the 1920s that paved the way for the rise of Hitler and Stalin and the eventual destruction of their independence.

But America came back. Washington's role in the liberation of Central and Eastern Europe from Nazi occupation as well as the vision and leadership of US President Harry S. Truman in designing a strategy to contain communism's spread in Europe rekindled new hopes for smaller countries on the continent. While America did not repeat the mistake of withdrawing from the continent after the end of World War II, American armies stopped short of occupying parts of the region in deference to the Red Army. America also failed to stand up for the future of the independence of the region and de facto accepted the Soviet sphere of influence in Central Europe in a mistaken effort to maintain a cooperative relationship with Stalin at Yalta—and even today Central and Eastern Europe sees itself as having paid the bill. After Stalin's death, the then Secretary of State John F. Dulles publicly committed the US to a policy of liberating Central Europe from Soviet domination. But when Hungarians in 1956 launched their uprising to achieve national independence, the US could or would do nothing to deter the eventual Soviet intervention.

In Central European eyes America was nonetheless seen as a largely benign and positive force, albeit one that was at times naïve about how to deal with

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<sup>1</sup> In his book *Svetova revoluce (The Making of a State)*, Masaryk wrote, 'the American state is different from the European states, namely from Prussia, Austria and Russia; even the French Republic inherited the institutions of old regime . . . which never existed in America . . . On many occasions, and also in the cemetery of Gettysburg battlefields, I devoted much thinking to the idea that our Czechoslovak state would resemble America in that we, too, have no dynasty of our own and dislike foreign dynasty . . . On the other hand, owing to the tradition of our Reformation we do not have an intimate relationship with the Church—a minus point unless we realize that a democracy and a republic must be based on morality. Our restored state, our democratic republic must be based on an idea, it must have its own reason for existence that will be universally recognized' (cited in Kovtun 1988, 53).

Moscow as well as subject to its own flirtations with the kind of *realpolitik* that had so often proved disastrous for the region. Whereas US presidents like Richard Nixon and his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger were feted in the capitals of Western Europe as brilliant statesmen long after they had left office, in Central European cities such as Warsaw, Prague or Budapest they were distrusted as leaders who produced policies such as the Sonnenfeldt Doctrine and who followed in the shoes of other Americans who had sacrificed Central European interests on the altar of cooperation with Moscow.

Despite this mixed legacy and failings, America was overwhelmingly seen as the region's best hope and the only Western country willing and able to counter Moscow and stand up for eventual freedom and independence. If you ask West Europeans today who deserves historical credit for helping to end the Cold War, the names of individuals such as Mikhail Gorbachev or Willy Brandt are more often than not likely to come up. If you ask Central and East Europeans, they will point to two American presidents, each of them very different, whose strategies and impact were critical to the eventual victory of freedom fighters behind the Iron Curtain. The first is Jimmy Carter and his National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, who in the late 1970s made human rights and democracy a core part of American strategy. While derided in many capitals of Western Europe at the time,<sup>2</sup> this new American policy was warmly welcomed by dissidents in Central and Eastern Europe, who used it to help lay the foundation for Charter 77, Solidarity and other dissident movements throughout the region. This opened the door for individual dissidents and, subsequently, groups of activists to embrace these human rights standards as something not only inalienable to them but also something their governments were obliged to respect given the requirement they assumed through the Helsinki Final Act; and they could count on Western moral and political support.

The second American president Central and Eastern Europeans will point to as having played a key role in helping them obtain their freedom is Ronald Reagan. Reagan was of course despised even more than Carter in Western Europe in the 1980s. But in retrospect it is clear that his military build-up and his clear rhetoric about the Soviet 'evil empire' helped to precipitate the final Soviet retreat under Gorbachev. For example, the uncompromising stand of the US administration towards the Polish government after the declaration of martial law and the material and financial support for Polish Solidarity provided by American organisations like the National Endowment for Democracy, Freedom House and the American trade unions led by the AFL-CIO under Lane Kirkland helped the Polish opposition to survive and thus laid the ground for eventual roundtable talks.

As a result, dissidents in Central and Eastern Europe at times found themselves with close contacts and the support of Western political forces that had little in common at home and were normally adversaries, at least in the West. On the one hand, they enjoyed good ties and the support of those parts of

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<sup>2</sup>There were many well-known stories about the initial dismay of West European leaders over what they considered to be the naivety of President Carter's human rights approach. In July 1977, for example, the German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt and Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau warned President Carter that his crusade for human rights in the Soviet bloc had jeopardized the policy of *détente* (see Garthoff 1985, 570). For further details, see Carter (1982) and Brzezinski (1983).

the European left which had made human rights a central issue, especially within the German Greens, Dutch or Swedish leftists and British Labour activists. On the other hand, many similar Central and Eastern European dissidents agreed with Ronald Reagan and his uncompromising attitude toward the Soviet Union. Horrified by their own experiences with Moscow, they applauded when Reagan denounced the Soviet Union as an 'evil empire'. In the grand debate in the West over whether change in the East was more likely to take place through Western pressure or engagement, most dissidents were on the side of pressure whereas most West European governments opted for engagement.<sup>3</sup>

As a result, Central and East European dissidents were stunned when West European leaders like German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt expressed their 'understanding' that it had ostensibly been necessary to declare martial law in Poland in December 1981 to suppress Solidarity in the name of 'stability' in Europe—at a time when the United States was trying to send a very different set of signals to Moscow. Similarly, during the debate over NATO's dual-track decision, many Central and East European dissidents actually supported the deployment of such missiles in Western Europe in order to teach Moscow a lesson and to stifle what they saw as Soviet expansionism at a time when their West European counterparts were organising huge demonstrations against such deployments. When the members of then Western peace movements like Petra Kelly or Mary Kaldor had approached dissidents in Prague or Warsaw with a request for support, they were often met with reticence at best, given the then Green argument that both superpowers were morally culpable for the arms race and that both needed to withdraw their military forces from the heart of the continent.<sup>4</sup>

For all of these reasons, the language of détente and realpolitik promoted in Berlin and Paris was not especially popular in the living rooms of dissidents in Prague and Warsaw. In the broader Western debate over whether change in the East could be promoted more effectively by dealing with governments or also through direct contacts and support of opposition groups, many West European governments leaned toward dealing with the governments in the hope that change would emanate from reformist leaders whereas the United States leaned toward more direct contact with the opposition in an attempt to push for change from below. As far as the opposition in Central and Eastern Europe was concerned, they obviously preferred direct contacts between dissent and foreign diplomats and politicians and it was the United States together with smaller Western nations (like Canada, the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark) which pioneered the promotion of that kind of an approach. When Francois Mitterrand and Hans Dietrich Genscher finally extended a welcome to Lech Walesa and Vaclav Havel in late 1988, the Cold War was almost over.

Thus, after 1989, Czechs, Polish, Hungarian and Slovak elites emerged on the European scene as generally pro-American. They considered the US contribution to the end of the Cold War as well as to the liberation of captive nations as the most decisive among all other international factors. People still remember the warm welcome offered by huge crowds to President George Bush when he visited

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<sup>3</sup>The best study of this broader debate as seen in the case of Germany and *Ostpolitik* is Ash (1993).

<sup>4</sup>Perhaps the most eloquent description of East European dissident attitudes towards the Western peace movements can be found in Vaclav Havel's essay 'Anatomy of a Reticence' (Havel 1992, 291–322).

Warsaw, Prague and Budapest in early 1990. With all the respect and admiration for Margaret Thatcher, Helmut Kohl or Francois Mitterrand, they could only dream about receiving such warm greetings. The bitterness of Yalta in 1945 was still somehow overpowered by the bitterness of Munich and a memory of betrayal by former allies in 1938. So when West Europeans today suggest that the continent suffers under too much American influence or domination, many Central and East Europeans look back at their experience in the 20th century and conclude that the problems they faced were the result of too little as opposed to too much America.

### **The US Role in Anchoring Central and Eastern Europe to the West**

The inclinations of many democratic leaders of post-communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe to look to the United States were further reinforced by the experience these countries had in the 1990s with NATO and the EU. While a major theme of the revolutions that swept away communist rule in 1989 was a 'return to Europe', many Central and Eastern Europeans soon discovered that many West Europeans held ambivalent feelings at best about opening the doors to welcome them into European and transatlantic institutions. When French President Francois Mitterrand commented that he thought it would be 'decades and decades' before the Central and Eastern Europeans could expect to join the European Community, it shocked many in capitals from the Baltic to the Black Sea. In 1991, his proposal to establish a European Confederation as a way to keep Warsaw or Prague outside the EU core met with considerable resentment. But it also reflected a West European sentiment that was by no means limited to Paris.

This disillusionment with the initial reaction of Western Europe was one factor that led Central and East European leaders as pilgrims to Washington. There they soon discovered that one of their biggest champions was the United States. To be sure, in Washington, too, a majority of the policy community initially shared Western Europe's ambivalence about opening the doors of Western institutions such as NATO to these countries. But there was also a strong lobby among both Democrats and Republicans who from the outset saw the inclusion of these countries into the core institutions of the West as the natural next step in the consolidation of freedom and peace on the continent—and who quickly became champions of the issue. One need only compare Mitterrand's scepticism towards the idea with the openness of President Bill Clinton or of leading Republican figures such as Richard Lugar or John McCain.<sup>5</sup>

While it was German Defence Minister Volker Ruehe who first publicly raised the NATO enlargement issue in the spring of 1993, in reality this quickly became an agenda dominated by Washington. The United States' voice was essential not only because of American strength and power. At this juncture EU membership was a distant goal on the horizon and the only realistically achievable anchor for Central Europe in the near term was NATO membership. And on that issue Washington's attitude was decisive. Once the early inter-agency battles in the Clinton administration were waged and won, Washington became a driving force intellectually and politically in overcoming opposition and moving the alliance to open its doors to new members—as well as to ensure that it embraced a robust

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<sup>5</sup>For further details on how and why Central and East European leaders turned to NATO see Asmus (2002, 11–18).

'open door' policy to ensure the enlargement would continue in spite of strong Russian opposition. Strong American leadership on NATO enlargement also generated growing pressure on the European Union to keep pace and be equally ambitious.

Once again, the leaders of Central and Eastern Europe saw that it was the United States that was willing to bring its power to bear to champion their cause, stand up to Russian pressure and overcome the reticence of their Western European neighbours. Equally important, they witnessed how American policy was shaped by commitment to the consolidation of democracy and a rejection of the kind of *realpolitik* that had been so disastrous for the region in the past. This reaffirmed their faith in the United States as a benign superpower that was willing to champion their values and interests. Thanks to American leadership, they were able to transcend the dilemma of living in a geopolitical no-man's-land between Germany and Russia and obtain the same level of security taken for granted in much of Western Europe. When Secretary of State Madeleine Albright chose the Truman Library in Independence, Missouri in which to commemorate the successful conclusion of the first round of NATO enlargement, the leaders of Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary understood the powerful symbolism of that gesture and stood in tears at the actual ceremony.<sup>6</sup>

Today NATO and EU enlargements have become a new reality. The painful debates and often lukewarm support of some West European allies have been largely forgotten or swept under the rug and into the diplomatic archives. But these memories still linger in the capitals of those countries stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea. While many of these arguments took place in private and outside of public viewing, Central and East European leaders and diplomats knew only too well which European leaders had been reluctant, dragged their feet, privately proposed delays or simply tried to stonewall the process of bringing them into the West. And there is little doubt that NATO enlargement would have remained limited had the United States not fought for a robust open-door policy that would facilitate a large second round of seven countries extending from the Baltic to the Black Sea. NATO enlargement took the security issue off the table but it gave these countries a foot in the door. While they still had many additional criteria they were required to meet in the *acquis communautaire*, it de facto made them part of the West in a way that made EU membership less controversial and more of a technical issue. While we will never know whether the EU would have been able to enlarge without NATO enlargement, many Central and East Europeans think they know the answer to that question.

### **Common Values and Balancing Major European Powers**

The historical backdrop laid out above helps explain why such themes as 'freedom', 'democracy' and 'common values' resonate at times more strongly in Central and Eastern Europe than in some parts of Western Europe, where they are often dismissed as mere rhetoric. Central and East Europeans often note that American politicians and diplomats are much more comfortable talking about 'freedom', 'friends' and 'allies' whereas West Europeans talk about 'stability',

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<sup>6</sup> Both authors participated in the ceremony as members of the American and Czech delegations and witnessed the powerful emotions that were on display.

'interests' and *realpolitik* in foreign policy. To be sure, many Czechs, Poles, Hungarians and other Central Europeans are sceptical about the idealism of any major power, since their own history has led them to be cynical about the moral content of great power diplomacy. Nevertheless, it remains much easier for the United States to find and recruit partners in Central and Eastern Europe to participate in projects driven by ideals of spreading freedom and democracy elsewhere.

America still is seen as a model and example for these countries, which have undergone their own experience of oppression by totalitarian regimes. In contrast to many Western European countries, the US is seen as more willing to use its power and resources to promote freedom as part of its foreign policy. After decades of living in state-managed and over-regulated societies, the Central and Eastern Europeans have considerable admiration for American-style individualism and capitalism. Whereas American-style capitalism is rejected in West European intellectual salons, in capitals from Tallinn to Bratislava you find governments experimenting with policies involving lower taxes, flat rates, etc.—ideas that have been developed in the United States (and the UK) yet largely ignored or rejected in Western Europe.

Secondly, having only recently regained their freedom, Central and Eastern intellectuals still remember that one has to take an active approach in confronting and combating dictators and totalitarian regimes. Given their painful pasts, many in this region are predisposed to embrace an activist approach based on the idea that the values of liberty, freedom and democracy cannot be taken for granted and need to be defended. Thus, there is a common appreciation for American activism and idealism. If there is one lesson from the past decade that can serve as a compass for the future, it is that they are better off when they proactively take their future into their own hands, when they work together as a region and when they dare to be bold (Asmus 2003).

It is certainly no accident that Washington and the region have worked closely on a whole series of initiatives along such lines. For example, the Czechs and Poles supported US initiatives in the UN Commission for Human Rights on Cuba and Burma. Former President Vaclav Havel offered to host the relocation of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in Prague and supported broadcasting to Iran and Iraq. Many Central European leaders were willing to embrace the issue of Baltic independence and promote the Baltic states' eventual inclusion in NATO and the EU at a time when this was taboo or opposed in most of Western Europe. During the Kosovo campaign, Hungary allowed the US to operate from military bases on its soil even before it joined the alliance and almost all Central and East European countries took part in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Slovak, Polish, Czech and Baltic NGOs were and remain very active in supporting and mobilising pro-democracy movements in Serbia (Otpor), Georgia (Chmara), Ukraine (Pora) and Belarus (Zubr)—often in close cooperation with their American counterparts (National Endowment for Democracy, National Democratic Institute, International Republican Institute, Freedom House, German Marshall Fund).

Last but not least, one can find a kind of emotional solidarity with the United States in parts of Central and Eastern Europe as well. Many Central and Eastern Europeans still feel gratitude for the leading role the Americans played during the struggle of the Cold War. Therefore they look uncomfortably at fashionable anti-Americanism, so widespread in Western Europe recently. They do not share it

and they do not understand the purpose and logic behind it. Therefore, they tend to side with the US administration in some cases even when American liberals have problems supporting the policies of their government. In 2003, Adam Michnik—in response to a German journalist who claimed that Vaclav Havel, Adam Michnik and Gyorgy Konrad had become indiscriminating admirers of America—wrote in his *Gazeta Wyborcza*,

The hatred felt towards America becomes absurd when it ceases to be a critical stance that is normal within democratic discourse and takes up the defence of brutal, totalitarian dictatorships. The so-called peace movements of the Cold War burned effigies of American presidents and genuflected before Stalin's portraits. We will not repeat such a masquerade today. (Michnik 2003)

There are often two sides to any story. And, last but certainly not least, these idealistic sentiments in Central and Eastern Europe dovetail with a healthy sense of national self-interest and self-preservation. History has taught these nations never to be caught alone in a dark alley with Germany or Russia—or to rely on France or the United Kingdom for national salvation. History has taught them that anything that legitimates value-free realpolitik will eventually come to haunt them as well. Memories of Rapallo and Molotov's diplomacy are still alive. When Central Europeans watch Chancellor Schroeder or President Chirac court Vladimir Putin and claim to deal with him under the mantle of a European common foreign and security policy without meaningful consultations having taken place, it is perhaps not surprising that their instinct tells them to strengthen ties with Washington. They have concluded that keeping America engaged in European affairs is the best option for small and medium-sized countries in their situation. Whereas many Western Europeans today argue that the EU should provide a check or counterweight to balance American power and unilateralism, Central and East Europeans remind them of Western European powers' own unilateralism and how these powers have treated them. In Central and Eastern Europe, America is still seen as a power whose inclusion and engagement is essential for countering some of Europe's own and less attractive and at times unilateral instincts.<sup>7</sup>

This Atlanticist bond also carries over into some hard-headed calculations when it comes to European integration. The deepening of the European integration process and the new EU Constitutional Treaty confront the region with an updated version of the historical dilemma of balancing Russia and Germany. As federalism deepens, they are faced with the need to either become part of the core of the emerging EU or to find a way of balancing it. If countries like the United Kingdom or Poland succeed in becoming part of the core of the EU, the smaller Central and Eastern European countries will be reassured on many fronts and have better options. They would also be reassured that the EU is likely to evolve in a fashion that preserves the transatlantic dimension of the EU's relations with Washington. Yet, if the referendum on the constitution were to fail in the United Kingdom, then the countries of the region would find themselves in a bind with limited and less attractive options such as simply following the Franco-German motor. In a nutshell, Central and Eastern Europeans need London at the heart of Europe politically in order to balance the central powers of the EU, like France and

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<sup>7</sup>On this point see Sikorski (2003).

Germany. They need British forces because they are among the most competent and effective in Europe, and they would prefer to keep the English language as the European *lingua franca*. Therefore, they also need America to stay involved in Europe.

Central and East European support and cooperation with the United States has not been without trepidation or doubt. During the Kosovo crisis in the late 1990s, for example, many in the region were troubled by the American-led campaign to oust Milosevic. Leaders such as Vaclav Havel felt strongly that a dictator like Milosevic had to be confronted and favoured humanitarian intervention to help people in need. Yet, the Czech populations had strong ties with the Serbian people based on a shared history of great power intervention. And many Czechs were suspicious when they looked at the leaders of the Kosovar rebels, who at times reminded them more of cigarette or drug smugglers than of freedom fighters.

Similarly, on Iraq many Central and East Europeans leaders supported in principle a policy of rolling back a totalitarian leader such as Saddam Hussein, given their own history with dictatorship, and public opposition to the war was certainly less intense than in Western Europe. At the same time, these countries came under serious pressure from France and Germany not to participate and actions such as the 'Letter of Eight' created an uproar in the halls of Paris and Berlin. When American strategists started to talk about the strategic imperative of promoting democracy in the broader Middle East, even some freedom fighters in Warsaw, Prague and Budapest wondered whether perhaps this was American idealism gone a bit too far.

### **Looking Ahead**

In conclusion, we return to the question posed by Timothy Garton Ash: what will Central and Eastern Europe look like in a decade's time? Will these countries still be a collection of largely like-minded Atlanticist countries? Or will they also have joined the current European mainstream and embraced their own version of Euro-Gaullism and more distant ties to Washington? Or will different countries go off in different directions and line up on different sides of the issue within the EU—with Poland and Romania firmly in the Atlanticist camp and Slovenia and perhaps others in the more Euro-Gaullist school? As the late Chinese Premier Chou En Lai is reported to have remarked when asked of his assessment of the French Revolution, it may still be too early to tell. But what one can do is to identify several of the key factors likely to determine the answer to this question.

One should perhaps start by noting that Central and Eastern Europeans never wanted or expected to face this issue. Choosing between their Atlanticist and European vocations is the last thing these countries were thinking of as they worked to join the EU and NATO in the 1990s. From the outset, they saw the two as complementary and mutually reinforcing goals. Having been lectured by the West for a decade on the need to prove their ability to cooperate with each other as a precondition for membership, they succeeded only to soon find the US and key European allies themselves embroiled in the worst transatlantic brawl in decades and engaging in behaviour that—had the Central and East Europeans themselves engaged in it—might have disqualified them from EU and NATO membership in the first place.

The fact that many Central and East European governments were willing to take a stand in favour of Atlanticism on a host of issues—ranging from Iraq to Russia to Israel—as opposed to trying to duck the issue or stay neutral surprised many. Standing up to France and Germany was and is not without risk, domestic controversy or cost. It was a conscious strategic choice. These countries did so not to do Washington some kind of favour or because they were ‘vassals’ as some critics suggested, but for reasons of geography, history and their own understanding of their national self-interest. After all, one of the key lessons these countries had learned in the bloody course of the 20th century was that if they did not defend their own interests, no one would. And the recent experience of the 1990s had reminded them that it would be a mistake to leave their fate in the hands of the major European powers alone.

To be sure, some would argue that these decisions were taken by the elites of the region and run against currents in public opinion. Thus, it is only a matter of time before the elites of the region will be forced to adapt their policies to the dominant current view—driven by France and Germany—on the European continent which favours a more distant relationship with Washington, or so the argument goes. Public opinion is obviously important. And it is also true that public opinion in many Central and Eastern European countries, while initially quite supportive on issues like supporting Washington on Iraq, has since shifted and looks at first glance to be in line with the more critical mood in other West European countries.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, what is also noteworthy is the ability of relatively weak coalition governments in the region to sustain this engagement and close cooperation with Washington. And what these numbers often obfuscate is the fact that the nature of the debates that take place in capitals of Western and Central and Eastern Europe often remains quite different—as visits to these capitals will quickly reveal. At the same time, these countries would certainly hesitate before acting if a similar transatlantic rift in the near future were to compel them to take sides again. In several of these countries, one can see cracks in the Atlanticist consensus as voices suggest they should align themselves more closely with Brussels than with Washington. And public opinion and the mass media, now quite often dominated by Western European owners in many of these countries, are also increasingly critical of the United States.

This raises the key question of the longer-term orientation of the region. Clearly there are real and reinforcing factors that have made Central and Eastern Europeans staunch Atlanticists. Those factors are rooted in geography, the history of the last century and perceptions of national self-interest. They are likely to remain enduring and critical variables in the future. But it would be a mistake to assume this is permanent. Neither Washington nor the political elites in the region can take it for granted. Historical memories fade, gratitude is a wasting asset in international affairs, and elites turn over and retire. Against this backdrop, we suggest three variables that might be key.

The first and most important is American behaviour and policy. Atlanticism in Central and Eastern Europe is not a blank cheque. America’s standing in this

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<sup>8</sup>See, for example, the annual public opinion *Transatlantic Trends* surveys at <[www.gmfus.org](http://www.gmfus.org)> undertaken in recent years by the German Marshall Fund of the United States which documents this convergence.

region is connected to the belief that the United States is a benign and largely altruistic Atlanticist power willing to use its might in pursuit of a set of purposes and goals that these countries share and from which they and the region benefit. Central and East Europeans today are still inclined to trust the motives of America more than those of many major European powers. This standing is also based on performance and effectiveness and America's willingness to take the interests of its allies into account.

If such factors are called into question, if America comes to be seen in the region as a unilateralist nation pursuing a narrow self-centred agenda and unwilling to take its allies' concerns into account, then such support is likely to dissipate and eventually collapse—precisely because then the United States will be seen as having ceased to be the kind of power so many Central and East Europeans have respected so much in the past. This is why the debate over the Iraq War has been so important because it has gone to the core of American motives, use of power and performance.

America is also attractive to many Central and Eastern Europeans as an open country, which has historically extended its arms to peoples of this region. Throughout history many Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians and other people sought their education or made their fortune in coming to America. In doing so, they have contributed both to the development of American society as well as to deepening the mutual bonds across the Atlantic. As the United States after the terrorist attacks of September 11 risks closing itself to the outside world—with increasing restrictions on visas and bureaucratic obstacles for incoming foreign students—or is perceived as not tackling serious economic and environmental challenges of the current global world, it is in danger of losing its attractiveness in Central and Eastern Europe as an open, tolerant and free society, especially for young people.

Second, another critical question likely to shape future attitudes is the future shape of the EU and, in particular, the positions of the major European powers in the Union. What kind of EU is going to emerge in the years and decades ahead? To what degree will the major powers of the EU be willing to take the interests and concerns of Central and Eastern Europe into account? How will Europeans define their core purpose and what kind of partnership will they seek to have with the United States—or with Russia? Will the EU develop based on the French concept of a kind of 'neo-Carolingian Empire' and as a counterweight to the US—and thus seek to balance American power in the global scene? Or will those prevail who seek to build an Atlanticist EU in close partnership with Washington to jointly manage the challenges of the world in the 21st century?

What is critical is not only how Central Europeans answer this question but how Washington does as well. The concept of European integration was conceived of as a transatlantic exercise under Jean Monnet—and enjoyed full US support as a means to end the cycle of war and conflict on the continent. In many ways Americans can be considered one of the founding fathers of European integration: the Acheson Memorandum of 1947 came three years ahead of the famous Schuman Declaration of 1950. However, that changed as Monnet was supplanted by De Gaulle and Americans have become increasingly worried since then that the European project may become one hostile to the United States. If the EU comes to be seen in America more and more as a competitor or even

a counterweight, then such support for European integration in the US might evaporate, which would confront the region with a major strategic dilemma.

In facing this complex set of challenges, the key question for Central and Eastern Europe in future will be less and less the simplistic question of whether it should side with Washington and London or Paris and Berlin. Instead, the issue will be more and more how these countries line up and help form coalitions within Europe on the nature of the EU. An American policy of divide and conquer will have little support in the region. Even most of the staunchest Atlanticists in Central and Eastern Europe would not be willing to marginalise their countries on a European periphery or to assist in a process of destroying EU integration as a whole. But on the other hand they also want the EU to be an outward-looking institution working closely with the US around the world. They do not believe that Europe alone is willing or able to face the challenges of the 21st century when it comes to radical Islamism, international terrorism or weapons of mass destruction. The notion that the EU should play the role of a counterweight is alien and anathema to them. Indeed, they are more inclined to see the US as a counterweight to some of the less attractive influences and traditions within Europe.

Third and finally, leadership will be central in shaping the future orientation of the region. Central and Eastern Europe have been fortunate to have a set of bold and brave leaders—ranging from former dissidents like Vaclav Havel to reform communists turned social democrats like Aleksander Kwasniewski—who since the fall of communism have steered their countries toward and eventually into the West against the odds. They were individuals who had drawn the lesson from their own history that Central and Eastern Europeans had to stand up and fight for their own rights and interest and not allow themselves to be treated as second-class Europeans. They were willing to take risks, assume responsibility and fight for close relations with Washington over the opposition of some in Western Europe, such as France who do not necessarily have with deep roots in this region.

Vaclav Havel having retired and Aleksander Kwasniewski soon to follow him, it is time for the next generation of younger Central and Eastern European leaders to step forward and answer these questions. Yet, this time they will—unlike their predecessors—have the advantage of doing so sitting as full and equal members of the EU and NATO. The future of Atlanticism in the region will also depend on their ability to interpret the lessons of the past and to respond to the challenges that lie ahead. But we believe that ten years from now they will still be making the right choices.

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