Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic

THE SECURITY RECORD OF “NEW EUROPE”

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I n the run-up to the Iraq War, the governments of France and Germany stated that they did not support an American-led war against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. When asked at a press event in January 2003 what he made of their opposition, then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld replied, “Now, you’re thinking of Europe as Germany and France… . I think that’s old Europe. If you look at the entire NATO Europe today, the center of gravity is shifting to the east.” He went on to argue that, when counting other countries but especially new and prospective member states, most NATO members were “not with France and Germany, . . . they’re with the United States.”

The secretary’s assessment seemed quickly to become reality. Within days, new NATO member states and aspiring NATO member states had signed letters opposing the French and German position and supporting the American view that Iraq was in breach of UN Security Council resolutions and that action against Iraq was required. In a letter published on January 30 in the Wall Street Journal under the title “United We Stand,” eight governments signaled their alignment with the Bush administration on Iraq. Among the eight signatories were Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic—the first countries added to NATO’s rolls following the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union.

Whether intended or not, Rumsfeld’s remarks, however, took on a broader meaning. For many commentators, the division of Europe and NATO into “old” and “new” was a not-too-subtle suggestion that the reliability and energy of longer-standing alliance members were increasingly in question when it came to supporting the global security interests of the liberal West. Perhaps such support was more likely to be found in the new members of NATO. Coming on the heels of old Europe’s slow and dysfunctional response to the Balkan crises of the 1990s and the apparent readiness of new Europe to support Washington’s plans for removing Saddam Hussein from power, Rumsfeld’s division appeared to capture not only a strategic insight for the time but also one that might shape American strategic planning into the future.

Indeed, there were reasons for such optimism about new Europe. First, as states and citizens recently freed from communist party despotism and Soviet hegemony, they were naturally inclined to stand with the United States, the leader of the free world, and to support it when opposing states or groups challenged the idea of political and economic freedom. Second, siding affirmatively with Washington was a price to be paid to keep America interested and engaged in a leadership role in European affairs. The worry was that, if the United States disengaged from Europe and turned its attention elsewhere, it would inadvertently open up a “grey area” in which the old power politics of Europe involving Moscow, Paris, and Berlin would once again come into play, possibly at the expense of...
the rest of Central and Eastern Europe. Implausible as it seemed at the time, the new democracies were not willing to ignore centuries of difficult history for the region. Elites in America might have thought the world had reached “the end of history,” but Poles, Hungarians, and Czechs were not so sure.4

**Quid pro Quo?**

In part to maintain Washington’s interest in their own security, the three new member states aligned themselves with American policies that reached well beyond their neighborhood’s collective security. Each country, for example, provided forces for the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. For the Afghanistan campaign, Czech deployments began with 350 in 2002, declining over the next few years, and then ramping up in 2007 and 2008 to a peak of about 620 troops in 2012. Hungary’s force levels in Afghanistan ranged from 130 to 180 until 2008, when similarly to the Czechs, troop numbers increased to a peak of 611 in 2013. In the case of Poland, deployments to Afghanistan ranged from 130 to 180 until 2008, when similarly to the Czechs, troop numbers increased to a peak of 611 in 2013. In the case of Poland, deployments to Afghanistan were initially small—between 87 and 160 from 2002 to 2007—but rose to well over 1,000 in 2008, reaching a peak of 2,580 in 2011.5

The substantial uptick in Polish numbers for Afghanistan reflected the shift of forces from Iraq, where early military deployments of Polish forces were significant. In 2003, Poland deployed 2,300 soldiers to Iraq and increased that number to 3,200 in 2007, with a rapid decline to single digits thereafter—reflecting both the success on the ground in Iraq after “the surge” and Washington’s pivot to deal with the conflict in Afghanistan. On a smaller scale, Hungary and Czech Republic repeated this pattern, initially deploying troops to Iraq in 2003 before gradually drawing down in the following years. As noted above, their contributions to the Afghan effort increased in response to the call from both the Bush and Obama administrations for NATO allies to do more there.

The governments did not always enjoy resounding public support for these “out of area” deployments. Indeed, even before joining NATO, each country was asked to assist in different ways in the European Union’s and NATO’s effort to stop the Balkan wars of the 1990s. For example, although Hungary made an air base and its air space available for the allied effort against Yugoslavian leader Slobodan Milosevic—and did so while potentially putting at risk ethnic Hungarians residing in the Serb-controlled province of Vojvodina—popular support for the Kosovo campaign was lukewarm at best in Budapest.6 Even less support was to be found in the Czech Republic, where a clear majority opposed the bombing campaign during the Kosovo War, even while all of NATO’s requests for use of airfields and air transit rights were granted.7

Further afield, in the run-up to the war in Iraq, some 70 percent of Czechs opposed military operations, and only 22 percent said they supported a campaign, even if sanctioned by the UN.8 Similarly, over three-quarters of Hungarians polled opposed the plan to remove Saddam from power,9 while Polish support for participation in the Iraq operation was, according to Pew, never higher than 40 percent and declined substantially thereafter.10

Although the three countries initially saw the 9/11 attacks on the United States as an Article V matter, over time support for keeping troops in Afghanistan declined. Given the mission’s difficulty and its still ambiguous results, this is perhaps to be expected. Thus, for example, while surveys showed almost 60 percent of Poles supported the participation of Polish soldiers in the NATO campaign in Afghanistan in early 2002, just a few years later approximately the same percentage supported removing those troops.11 Indeed, while Warsaw answered the Obama administration’s call for more allied troops in 2009, nearly 60 percent of Poles polled opposed doing so.12

The governments’ strategic calculus that it was necessary to partner with the US in foreign missions to sustain American interest in their own security was always a difficult sell to their respective populations, especially over time. Hence, while a bare majority in Hungary supported Budapest’s decision to participate in “peacekeeping” operations in Afghanistan following the removal of the Taliban from power, nearly three-quarters did not think that Hungarian troops “have to be” there.14 While the Polish government was deciding to send substantial new numbers...
to Afghanistan beginning in 2008, surveys in the summer of 2007 indicated that over 70 percent of Poles did not believe NATO’s operation would “contribute” to peace there and, consequently, had no direct relationship to their own security.\(^{15}\)

Polling data from February 2000 indicated that majorities in Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic supported NATO membership—although in the Czech Republic it was a bare majority.\(^{16}\) Yet at the same time, majorities in each of the three states opposed the stationing of foreign NATO troops in their countries. By February 2002, just two years later, only a smallish majority of Poles (56 percent) believed that NATO membership was a guarantee of their country’s independence, while a minority in the Czech Republic and Hungary shared that view.\(^{17}\)

### Slip Slidin’ Away

Given the relatively thin level of public support for NATO membership and NATO operations outside of NATO’s own territory, it was even more incumbent on the governments in Washington, Warsaw, Prague, and Budapest to adopt policies that could firm up ties between the countries and to the alliance. But, in practice, there was too little effort to do so in each of the capitals during the decade-plus that followed the three countries’ entrance into NATO.

Certainly, the three new allies believed that Washington too easily assumed that they would willingly send troops abroad to Iraq and Afghanistan for missions that had little connection to their immediate security and lacked broad backing from their citizens. Given the difficult character of both wars and that the United States was fully committed in terms of treasure and manpower, it was perhaps inevitable that Washington would overlook the importance of reinforcing the advantages of close ties with the United States. Poles, for example, have long seen the requirement that Poles need a visa to visit the United States as embarrassing and emblematic of Washington taking Polish support for granted, especially as the visa requirement has been waived for every one of Poland’s allied neighbors.

The one positive step taken by the United States was the Bush administration’s decision in 2006 to base 10 ballistic missile interceptors in Poland and to locate a missile defense radar in the Czech Republic.\(^{18}\) But while Warsaw was happy to have this minimal presence of the American military on the ground in Poland, Prague moved forward with the radar site in spite of public resistance; the effort to protect against an emerging missile threat from Iran was seen as more of a contribution to the security of alliance members further west than to that of their own homeland.

At the same time, there was a growing perception in Central Europe, starting in the first half of the 2000s, that the expansion of NATO further east and into the Baltic States established an unprecedented “buffer” for Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary so that there were no obvious adversaries on their borders. As Wess Mitchell and Leah Scheunemann have written, “The pacification of post-WWII Germany and enervation of post–Cold War Russia” and the expansion of “NATO to encompass the former Warsaw Pact . . . effectively sealed off the CEE [Central and Eastern European] region as an area of military and territorial competition for the first time since the liquidation of the early 20th century empires.”\(^{19}\)

In practice, this meant there was little obvious incentive to increase defense spending to meet the alliance’s 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) guideline; regional security was finished business. Additionally, with increased attention being paid to the requirements for EU membership, Prague, Warsaw, and Budapest were arguably paying more attention to Brussels than either Washington or Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers (SHAPE) in Mons, Belgium.

The Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008 did not change this dynamic in any significant way, in part because a lame-duck and exhausted Bush White House was not interested in using the invasion to reinvigorate alliance ties in the region in the face of an increasingly belligerent Russia. In part because of the global recession, there was even less interest in increasing defense budgets to deal with a possible new threat on the continent. Even Warsaw, which had possibly the closest relationship with the government in Tbilisi and was more exposed to a rising Russia
security threat than either of the two other capitals, stated in its 2009 defense white paper that there was only a “low probability . . . of large-scale armed conflict” that might involve Poland.

Upon taking office, the Obama administration’s priority was its “reset” of relations with Russia, not firming up ties with allies in Central and Eastern Europe. Its surprise decision in September 2009 to abandon the Bush administration’s missile defense plans for Poland and the Czech Republic—an announcement that came on the 70th anniversary of the Soviet Union’s invasion of Poland—only reaffirmed those allies’ impression of the changing character of transatlantic ties.

That change did not go unnoticed. In July 2009, more than 20 former ministers and heads of state from Central and Eastern Europe signed an open letter to the Obama administration stating their concern about “the future of the transatlantic relationship.” They noted that “despite the efforts and significant contribution of the new members, NATO today seems weaker than when we joined.” Analyzing why, the signatories pointed to the fact that “in many ways the EU has become the major factor and institution in our lives. To many people it seems more relevant and important today than the link to the United States.” Compounding this trend was the “leadership change . . . coming in Central and Eastern Europe.” The reality is “there are fewer and fewer leaders who emerged from the revolutions of 1989” and “who experienced Washington’s key role in securing our democratic transition and anchoring our countries in NATO and EU.” As a result, Washington is “likely to lose many of its traditional interlocutors in the region.”

Of course, a generational and strategic change was underway in Washington as well. Officials who had worked or been elected during the Cold War—when European security issues took priority—were growing fewer and fewer in number. In addition, there was a new focus on the growing importance of Asia. This
was reflected most concretely in the Obama Pentagon’s issuance of the Defense Strategic Guidance in January 2012, which called for a shrinking American military to focus its resources in the Asia-Pacific region—the “pivot” or “rebalancing”—on the grounds that Europe was no longer a consumer of American security guarantees but rather a “producer of its own security.” Accordingly, the decision was made to halve the remaining US Army ground combat brigades in Europe, leaving just two brigade combat teams (BCTs) when, only a few months before, Admiral James Stavridis, then head of US forces in Europe and Supreme Allied Commander for NATO, had testified that four BCTs were “critical” to US commitments there. By 2014, the last of the M-1 Abrams tanks stationed in Germany had left Europe, meaning for the first time in nearly 70 years the US military had no main battle tanks on the continent.

**Military Spending**

Although the overall level of defense spending is not the only measure for gauging a nation’s commitment to a security alliance, it is nevertheless significant.

**Poland.** In the case of Poland, the news is relatively positive. Since joining NATO, Poland’s defense budget has steadily risen until this past year, with the only other exception being a modest cut in total expenditures for 2008. Indeed, the last few years have seen a more than modest boost.

As important as these increases have been, especially given the trend lines in the rest of the alliance during most of this period, the growth in defense spending has been tied to Poland’s substantial economic growth over the same period. Poland’s GDP grew at an average annual rate of 4.16 percent over the
As a result, viewing the country’s defense totals as a percentage of its GDP—a traditional measure of a nation’s defense burden—Poland’s burden has remained relatively constant and essentially flat until recently. Indeed, only last year did the government’s budget for the military break the 2 percent of GDP mark set at the 2002 NATO summit in Prague as the minimum each member-state should allot for defense.

There is also a question of how the country prioritizes defense as a national policy in the country’s budget. From 2002 to 2014, Poland increased each of the 10 major budget categories monitored by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). However, while defense spending increased by 91 percent over that period, it ranked seventh among the 10 in terms of percentage increase.

### Table 1. Poland: Growth of Government Spending

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Budget Category</th>
<th>Percentage Change from 2002 to 2014</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic Affairs</td>
<td>203%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment Protection</td>
<td>192%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Order and Safety</td>
<td>139%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation, Culture, and Religion</td>
<td>123%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>122%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Protection</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Defense</strong></td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Public Services</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing and Community Amenities</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### Figure 3. Poland: Defense Expenditures, by Category

In terms of how defense monies have been invested, like much of Europe, personnel costs over the years have taken up a greater share of the budget than is optimal, but in the most recent budgets they have come down appreciably as spending on procurement has increased. Indeed, the previous and current governments in Warsaw have prioritized force modernization and retirement and replacement of Soviet-era equipment. Poland now devotes over 30 percent of its defense budget to equipment, surpassing the 20 percent guideline set by both European Defence Agency, the EU’s defense agency, in 2007 and NATO in 2014 at the Wales Summit.

With plans to procure a host of new weapons and platforms—including submarines, helicopters, cruise missiles, and land vehicles—and campaign pledges from the recently elected Law and Justice party to keep on this track, overall defense spending could climb as high as 2.5 percent of GDP in the years ahead.

**Czech Republic.** Since the Czech Republic’s accession to NATO in 1999, its defense budget has increased from a little over CZK 41 billion to CZK 59.6 billion in 2009. In the immediate wake of the global recession and the euro crisis, the budget dropped rather precipitously, falling in 2014 below the 1999 total (in nominal terms). Since 2014, however, the defense budget has risen somewhat, with planned spending of CZK 47.8 billion in 2016—a slight increase from the 2015 budget.

Unlike Poland’s defense burden—which remained relatively constant as a percentage of GDP until recently—the Czech Republic’s has been in decline over the past decade. Although the percentage of defense spending relative to the country’s overall economy stayed above the 2 percent benchmark until 2003, it has fallen since then and, in recent years, stayed around the 1 percent mark.

Particularly striking is that the defense budget was not only the lowest priority of the major government

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**Figure 4. Czech Republic: Defense Expenditures**

As for how that shrinking budget has been spent, personnel costs have risen sharply as a percentage of the overall budget, while spending on modernization and infrastructure has, with a few exceptions, been well below the level necessary to train and equip Czech armed forces to meet alliance requirements. The result, as NATO’s own assessment of those forces revealed, is a military with undermanned combat support units, outdated communications, and significant shortages in logistic units.  

Readiness has also suffered, with pilot flying hours cut below NATO proficiency standards and Czech ground forces short on training levels. As a result, NATO headquarters has doubts about the readiness and sustainability of the one mechanized brigade budget accounts from 2000 to 2014 but also the only account to shrink over that time frame.


Table 2. Czech Republic: Growth of Government Spending

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Budget Category</th>
<th>Percentage Change from 2000 to 2014</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Public Services</td>
<td>138%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment Protection</td>
<td>131%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation, Culture, and Religion</td>
<td>123%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>115%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>110%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Protection</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Order and Safety</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Affairs</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing and Community Amenities</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defense</td>
<td>-26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Prague has committed to the alliance for meeting Article V contingencies. As one might expect with a procurement budget that has rarely accounted for more than 20 percent of the total budget over the past decade and of late (from 2013 to 2016) has amounted to 9.5, 6.5, 11.8, and 7.2 percent, the Czech forces find themselves using aging and obsolete Soviet-era platforms and equipment.

In its military strategy published in 2002, the Czech government recognized that, to participate in alliance operations with fully trained and properly equipped forces, the defense budget should not drop below 2.2 percent of the nation’s GDP—a floor it has never been above since 2000. It is no surprise then that the shrinking defense budget has left the Czech Republic with a military that candidly cannot fulfill its own stated objectives. Pressed by that fact and the changing security environment, the governing coalition pledged to reverse the decline, with the goal of spending 1.4 percent of GDP on defense by 2020. Between 2015 and 2025, the plan is to spend nearly CZK 150 billion to modernize Czech forces, including upgrading the capabilities of its fighters and acquiring new multirole helicopters, a new fleet of infantry fighting vehicles, and upgraded air defenses. The government also intends to add a third combat brigade and, more immediately, properly outfit the Czech brigade committed to NATO’s quick reaction forces.

The 2014 pledge to change course on defense spending will be good news to the Czech Republic’s allies and Washington in particular, but two issues remain. First, the pledge assumes annual GDP growth of 2 percent, which may be optimistic, depending on key economic assumptions. Second and just as significant, given the substantial hole in which the Czech military finds itself, will the planned increase be sufficient to address the identified capability gaps?
Hungary. Hungarian defense expenditures have risen in nominal terms since it became a member of NATO in 1999. Immediately following accession, backed by strong economic growth, the Hungarian defense budget increased substantially—although it admittedly started from a low base. With the Hungarian economy on the rise again, after a seven-year slump from 2007 to 2014, defense expenditures have begun to increase again.

In terms of defense burden, however, after a short rise in the two years following accession, defense spending as a percentage of Hungary’s GDP has steadily declined. According to NATO’s accounting, Hungary’s defense expenditures in 2015 totaled 0.94 percent of the country’s economy and increased to slightly over 1 percent in 2016, leaving it among the bottom five of member states.

Not surprisingly, of the 10 OECD budget categories, defense spending increased the least from 2000 to 2014. What is striking is the relative rate of spending growth for the military over that period when compared with other budget accounts. The budgets of “recreation, culture, and religion” and “environment protection” grew 15 and 20 times faster, respectively, than defense, and the total budget grew nine times faster. In 2012, the Hungarian government issued a security strategy paper that stated Budapest saw no conventional threat on the horizon and no other country as an adversary and stipulated that, in addition to the normal tools of statecraft, economic stability and stable social structures were key to the country’s security.

However, the 2012 military strategy paper that accompanied the security strategy set a goal of dedicating 30 percent of future defense budgets to modernization. To date, that has not happened. Since the turn of the century, in fact, equipment has consistently been less than half of that goal.

Having hit rock bottom, the Hungarian government planned in July 2015 to up defense expenditures to Ft 299 billion in 2016 and outlined its

Figure 7. Hungary: Defense Expenditures

procurement goals for the immediate years ahead. The list is extensive and includes acquisition of new ground vehicles, modernized command and control systems, new anti-tank systems, a replacement of its Soviet-era helicopter fleet, and precision weaponry and night-mission capabilities upgrades to its Gripen fighters, along with a general upgrade of personal field equipment used by the army. As noted by the defense minister in 2013, other than the Gripen, Hungary had not acquired a major new military system since the end of the Cold War.

With these programs in mind, the expectation is that Hungary will boost defense spending to just short of 1.4 percent of GDP by 2022—still well below the 2 percent mark set by NATO in 2002 and reaffirmed as a 2024 target at the Wales NATO Summit in 2014. As with the Czech Republic and Poland, it is not clear that even the planned increases in defense resources can meet Hungary’s modernization ambitions. Moreover, this will not be the first time the government in Budapest has set defense burden goals. Previous targets were 1.8 percent of GDP by 2002; 2 percent by 2006; and 1.9 percent by 2007.

### Table 3. Hungary: Growth of Government Spending

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Budget Category</th>
<th>Percentage Change from 2000 to 2014</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Environment Protection</td>
<td>352%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation, Culture, and Religion</td>
<td>257%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Affairs</td>
<td>181%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Protection</td>
<td>158%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Public Services</td>
<td>157%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Order and Safety</td>
<td>138%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>137%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>130%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing and Community Amenities</td>
<td>107%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Defense**

17%

Energy and Geopolitics

The energy mix for Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary consists principally of a combination of oil, natural gas, and coal. The Czech Republic and Hungary also generate energy with nuclear power, and Poland is planning to do so in the future. Each of the three has a higher import dependency to meet its energy requirements than the European Union and NATO states as a whole—and that dependency is tied substantially to supplies of oil, gas, and nuclear fuel from Russia.45

All three countries depend heavily on Russia for crude oil, but the existence of a global oil market makes this dependency less worrisome. It would be difficult for Moscow to play an “oil card” when its customers can readily find other oil sources. This is considerably less true with their dependency on Russian natural gas and nuclear assistance. Both involve substantial lead times and up-front costs to construct the necessary infrastructure for power delivery, and as a result, governments, pipeline companies, and plant operators typically sign long-term contracts specifying supply amounts and pricing arrangement to help guarantee returns on their investments.

Natural gas appears to be becoming more like oil—that is, a global commodity—but it is not there yet. As for nuclear energy, Russian companies retain a dominant position in the regional market, since Russian state-owned companies designed and built the plants in the Czech Republic and Hungary during the Soviet era. However, mitigating that dependency is the fact that, once nuclear plants are built and fuel rods supplied, Moscow cannot turn off the “spigot” as it can with gas given the multiyear life expectancy of the fuel rods.

Before the Nord Stream I gas pipeline, which passes between Russia and Germany under the Baltic Sea, was completed in 2011, approximately 80 percent of gas exports to Europe passed through Ukraine.46 In 2006 and 2009, disputes between Ukraine and Russia over transit fees, payments, and gas prices led Gazprom, the Russian natural gas company, to temporarily cut gas supplies to and running through Ukraine. Gas supplies for several European countries
dropped anywhere from 100 percent to 14 percent—during winter, no less. Then, in June 2014, following the Russian military invasion of Crimea and the Russian-supported conflict in eastern Ukraine, Gazprom cut the flow of gas once again, ostensibly over a dispute about gas prices and payments in arrears.

Although publicly an economic dispute, Europe's singular dependence on an unpredictable supplier made it a matter of national security. Concerns were heightened in the wake of the Ukraine crisis of 2014; Europe could not ignore the Kremlin's intentions to counter the EU's efforts to bring Ukraine closer to the West and to challenge the existing European security architecture.

For some time, Europe's dependence on Russian energy supplies transported through Ukraine was understood to provide Moscow with greater geopolitical leverage in Europe than it might otherwise have. Western Europe's own sources of gas were limited—or not developed—and the existing pipelines structures, which had been built during the Soviet era, were designed principally to serve Moscow's interests and solidify control over its Warsaw Pact allies. As a result, following the Cold War, Gazprom held a near monopoly position on gas supplies and an increasing hand in distribution networks.

Construction of the Nord Stream pipeline deepened Western European dependence on Russian gas. Moreover, in creating a supply infrastructure that bypassed Ukraine (and the attendant problems in Russian-Ukrainian relations), Moscow created a situation in which Western European customers had less interest in or concern about possible interruptions in gas flows through Ukraine. Now that Germany and nations to the west had assured supplies, states to the east were more at the mercy of Kremlin's machinations. In 2006, Polish Defense Minister Radek Sikorski compared the agreement between Germany and Russia to proceed with the pipeline's construction with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, reflecting—
although no doubt exaggerating—Warsaw’s strategic concerns at the time.\textsuperscript{48}

Europe’s dependence on Russian supplies of natural gas is old news. And the cutoff of supplies reaching Europe through the Ukraine pipeline system in 2006 and 2009 generated considerable discussion in Washington and Brussels about the need to diversify supplies and lessen Gazprom’s dominant position vis-a-vis the European market. In the cases of Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, for example, the Russian decision to interrupt gas supplies in 2009 meant cuts of 33 percent, 71 percent, and 45 percent, respectively, in the total amount of gas available for each country.\textsuperscript{49} A “stress test” carried out by the European Commission in the wake of the 2014 crisis studied the possible impact on winter energy supplies for EU member states if Russian gas supplies were again interrupted. The test showed just how little progress the EU had made in reducing that dependency; in such a situation, EU states, especially those in Eastern and Central Europe, would be left to fend for themselves.\textsuperscript{50}

With predictions that Europe’s reliance on natural gas imports will only grow over the next decade, the urgency—or lack thereof—with which individual capitals address the issue is a useful window for assessing how countries judge the threat level Russia poses to the transatlantic security order. In turn, it is a useful measure of their willingness to work together as allied states in reducing dependency on Russian-supplied energy. In fine, what policies and plans have Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic put in place to reduce Russian leverage in the energy sector?

**Poland.** Paradoxically, Poland is both highly dependent on Russian sources of energy and not.

With regards to hydrocarbons, over 90 percent of Polish crude oil imports come from Russia, and over 75 percent of its imported gas is Russian. Those percentages have not changed appreciably since 1999. In fact, in gross terms, Russian gas exports to Poland amounted to slightly less than 6 billion cubic meters (BCM) in 1999 and rose to 9.6 BCM in 2013 as Polish needs grew in parallel with its expanding economy.\textsuperscript{51}

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**Figure 11. Poland: Percentage of Oil and Gas Imports from Russia**

![Graph showing percentage of oil and gas imports from Russia for Poland from 1999 to 2014.](image)

However, Poland is less reliant on oil and gas as a percentage of its total energy supply, or total primary energy supply (TPES), than its former Warsaw Pact neighbors. More than 50 percent of Poland’s TPES is tied to coal, with well over 80 percent of its electricity generated from coal. For electricity production, Poland is the most coal-dependent country in the world.\(^{52}\)

This advantage in Poland’s energy mix is increasingly under pressure from the European Union’s (de facto anti-coal) environmental policies. Although Warsaw has consistently pushed back against the EU’s environmental goals, it is unlikely that it can continue to resist Brussels’ policy agenda.\(^{53}\) Accordingly, with no nuclear power plants in operation on Polish soil, a still-expanding economy, and electricity consumption forecast to grow by some 40 percent in the next decade and a half, the country’s oil and gas requirements will likely grow substantially.\(^{54}\)

To stave off an even more problematic dependency on Russian energy supplies, Poland, in the wake of the success of the “shale revolution” in the United States, hoped to exploit its own shale gas resources. Initial estimates at the beginning of the decade put Polish gas reserves as the largest in Europe. However, further exploration has reduced those estimates to a fraction of the originally predicted values, leading major energy companies to try their hand elsewhere.\(^{55}\)

Poland is moving forward, however, with plans to build two new nuclear plants. During the late stages of the Cold War, Poland had begun construction of four Soviet-designed reactors, but with the 1986 Chernobyl disaster in neighboring Ukraine fresh on the mind, construction was canceled in 1990 as Poland transitioned away from Communist Party rule. Since 2005, Warsaw has slowly moved forward with plans to reintroduce nuclear power into its energy mix. In 2014, the government adopted plans that would have seen a first plant in operation by 2025 and the second by 2035.\(^{56}\) However, according to the Polish utility company leading the project, those dates have slipped by several years, with the earliest date for the first plant sometime after 2030.\(^{57}\) When and if the plants are built, there almost certainly will be no Russian contractor involved in the construction, maintenance, or fueling of Poland’s plants—which has not always been the case in neighboring states.

More immediately, Poland has built a liquefied natural gas terminal (LNG) at Swinoujscie, a Baltic Sea port near the German border. Once the terminal is fully operational, the Poles will be able to import gas from sources other than Russia for its own domestic market and, with the construction of new interconnecting pipelines, provide gas to the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Ukraine, and Lithuania.\(^{58}\) Already, Poland has developed a reverse-flow pipeline connection with Germany, which allows gas to move west to east as well as east to west. With plans to add an interconnecting pipeline for receiving gas from Norway through Denmark, Warsaw is on its way to being able to supply 90 to 100 percent of its gas needs without Russian imports.\(^{59}\)

In addition, Poland has established a reverse-flow capability for existing pipelines from Ukraine and will be constructing additional infrastructure to allow it to provide gas from Swinoujscie to Ukraine.\(^{60}\) This should reduce Russian leverage over Ukraine by allowing it to access gas not directly supplied from Russia by Gazprom. Reducing Gazprom’s leverage lessens the likelihood of a Kremlin decision to cut supplies that transit Ukraine on the way to Gazprom customers further west. This should mean, in turn, that Gazprom customers in the region have less reason to take a benign (or worse) stance in NATO or EU meetings on Russian behavior out of concern that Russia will cut gas transiting to and through Ukraine.

**Czech Republic.** Czechs, like their neighbors in Central and Eastern Europe, are highly dependent on Russian imports of oil and gas. According to EU figures, a majority of Czech crude oil imports come from Russia, while in recent years Russian gas imports have grown to over 90 percent of all imported gas. In fact, in 2012 and 2013, Russian-sourced gas comprised 100 percent of total imports.

This dependency is mitigated somewhat by the fact that the Czech Republic generates over half of its electricity from coal, and another third comes from nuclear energy.\(^{61}\) As a result, the TPES share for natural gas is approximately 16 percent.\(^{62}\) However, as with Poland, the Czech Republic’s heavy reliance
on coal for generating electricity is coming under increased pressure on environmental grounds, with a number of power plants reaching their end life over the next decade.

The government’s progress toward adding significant new nuclear power to the energy mix—a policy decision by the government in 2004—has been slowed by concerns about the profitability of any new nuclear plants and, in turn, the government’s reluctance to provide price guarantees to the state-owned utility company, which would operate the plants. As a result, planning for the new plants has slowed, and now they will likely not come online until the mid-2030s at the earliest. Moreover, at present, the sole nuclear fuel supplier for the older Russian-designed nuclear power plants is a Russian company, which holds contracts to be the exclusive supplier until 2020. To meet EU fuel diversification requirements, however, the Czech power company selected US-based Westinghouse Electric to test its nuclear fuel assemblies in the existing reactors as a first step toward potentially opening up the nuclear supply chain.

With the decline of coal and the uncertainty and delays in nuclear power, the Czech Republic’s gas requirements are expected to increase over the next two decades with the majority of that gas still coming from Russia. But by adding pipeline connections for gas coming south from Nord Stream I and upping internal storage capacity, Prague has lessened the likelihood that a stoppage of gas through Ukraine would severely impact the country’s energy supplies and economy. Combined, these measures also have allowed the Czechs to modify the monopolistic “take-or-pay” element of contracts with Gazprom in which the gas customer is required to buy a certain amount of gas annually, regardless of whether it uses that amount. With greater pipeline interconnectors and potentially more diverse supplies, Czech gas prices have moved more in line with German hub prices.

**Hungary.** As with the Czech Republic, Hungary’s energy mix contains elements of crude oil, natural gas, coal, nuclear, and renewables. More than a third of Hungary’s total energy share comes from gas. However, consumption of natural gas has declined...
in the country over the decade—a trend seen generally throughout Europe. With Hungary producing approximately 20 percent of its gas from domestic sources, imports are down from a decade ago.

That said, dependency on Russian natural gas supplies, as a percentage of imports, has increased. Always high, it has steadily risen from 75 to 80 percent in 2006 and 2007 to 95 percent in the past few years. Nor does Hungary seem in a hurry to diversify its overall gas supplies from Russia. While it has been building pipeline interconnectors with surrounding countries, such as Croatia, Serbia, Romania, and Slovakia, the efforts seem to be as much designed to allow Hungary to become a transit hub for Russian gas to the region as not. Having also built up substantial storage capacity for gas, with Russian help, Hungary is now able not only to withstand Russian cuts to gas piped through Ukraine for a significant period but also to provide reserve gas to others in the region.

When Gazprom stopped supplying gas to Ukraine in June of 2014, Hungary initially joined Slovakia and Poland in using the reverse-flow capabilities of their pipelines to supply Ukraine with natural gas, which had been supplied by Gazprom. However, after a visit by the head of Gazprom in September 2014, Hungary suspended gas supplies to Ukraine, resuming them a few months later in January 2015. In the meantime, Russian gas delivered to Hungary from pipelines was stored there and made available to its other European customers in case Moscow decided to cut supplies to Ukraine again.

Budapest’s position in this regard was in step with its support for the proposed South Stream pipeline, which would have brought Russian gas through the Black Sea to Europe through Bulgaria, Serbia, and Hungary—bypassing Ukraine altogether. At odds with the European Union’s policies on energy and its efforts to lessen Russian dominance of the energy market, South Stream was also in competition with Nabucco, a US-supported alternative proposed pipeline, intended to bring non-Russian gas from the Caspian Sea region. Although Viktor Orbán, the current Hungarian prime minister, had been a harsh critic of the previous government’s support for South Stream when his party was in the opposition—calling it an
“outright coup” against his country—upon returning to the premiership, he became a supporter of the planned pipeline. Following the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the EU parliament passed a resolution opposing the South Stream project. However, only a few months later, Orbán’s majority in the Hungarian assembly passed its own measure authorizing Hungarian participation in the pipeline in spite of objections from Brussels.

Ultimately, facing a concerted EU effort to block the project, Russian President Vladimir Putin pulled the plug on the South Stream in December 2014. At the same time, Putin proposed the construction of an alternative pipeline, Turkish Stream, which, if built, would bring Russian gas across the Black Sea to Turkey. Orbán, again putting aside the issue of European energy dependency, was quick to support the project as “a good investment for Hungary” if downstream the pipeline were to run through Hungary.

Orbán’s willingness to deepen energy ties with Russia does not end with natural gas. In December 2014, just a few days after South Stream had been deep-sixed, Budapest and Moscow announced that a subsidiary of Rosatom, the state-owned Russian atomic energy company, would take the lead in designing, constructing, and maintaining two new nuclear power plants in Hungary. The agreement for the two new plants, largely financed by Russian loans, was made with no normal public tender, no competitive bids, and a provision that the terms of the contract were to be kept secret for 15 years.

Rosatom was also given exclusive rights to provide fuel for the plants for 20 years. The Euratom Supply Agency balked at this provision, since it ran afoul of the European Commission’s policy to support energy diversification. The agency eventually forced the contract to be restructured and halved the period for which Rosatom was to be the exclusive fuel provider. Further complicating matters for Budapest and Moscow, the commission also has raised objections to both the lack of a public procurement process and the project’s overall financing.

Since early 2015, the EU has formally promoted an “energy union,” with the goal of a more unified and open market among the member states that would increase the continent’s access to more competitively priced, secure, and diverse supplies of energy. The long-discussed idea of a union took on more salience with the Russian war with Ukraine and the member states’ still significant reliance on Russian energy supplies. However, Orbán has made it clear that he considers the policy of an energy union a “major problem,” which obstructs his ability to cut deals with Moscow that, he argues, would benefit Hungary. As the Hungarian government’s National Energy Strategy 2030, published in early 2012, succinctly states: “Russia is Hungary’s most important energy partner . . . [and] Russia will remain the most important source of imports over the long term.”

Relations with Russia

For the people of Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, relations with Moscow during the Cold War were both similar and distinct. Each lived under the thumb of Soviet hegemony, and each saw attempts to break from that hegemony—Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, and Poland in 1981—crushed. But each of the three nations also developed distinct ways of living under the Kremlin’s control, with different levels of internal control, different forms and levels of domestic dissent, and ultimately, distinct nascent forms of civil society. Not surprisingly, then, since the end of the Cold War, while each of the three states shares formal attachments to the EU and NATO, they each have carved out distinct policies toward Russia, with geography, economics, history, and domestic politics shaping state decision making in unique ways.

Poland. As the country that in many ways first begat, with the establishment of the noncommunist trade union Solidarity in 1980, the process that eventually ended Soviet control over Eastern and Central Europe countries a decade later, Poland has been seen as the most pro-Western, pro-American, and anti-Russian of the former Warsaw Pact states. While that assessment is largely true, Warsaw’s policies toward the East have been more nuanced, more complex than is often understood.
With the breakup in 2001 of the Solidarity Electoral Action (AWS), a coalition of conservative, classical liberal, and Christian democratic groups, the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) came to power and remained the governing party until 2005. Drawing many of its members from Poland’s former communist party, the SLD was more willing to put aside suspicions about the Kremlin and its intentions toward former Soviet territories. As Russian President Vladimir Putin was largely focused on Russian domestic affairs, the SLD could, as it stated in the government’s 2003 national security strategy, set “positive” relations with Moscow as a goal.80

In 2005, the conservative, more nationalist, Law and Justice party (PiS) replaced the Democratic Left Alliance. With Putin consolidating power in Russia and taking a much harsher tone toward NATO and the United States, PiS was more open to raising warning flags about possible Russian ambitions. As the government noted in its rewrite of the national security strategy, “taking advantage of the rising energy prices, [Russia] has been attempting to reinforce its position on a supra-regional level.”81 In the face of vociferous objections from Moscow and despite polls showing a lack of popular support, the PiS government in early 2007 began negotiations with the Bush administration on plans to host a missile defense site.

PiS held power for two years before handing over the government to the Civic Platform (PO), a center-right party. Civic Platform held the reigns in Warsaw from 2007 to 2015. In some respects, PO split the difference between Law and Justice and the Democratic Left Alliance on policies toward Russia. Although willing to continue with the American plans to build a ballistic missile interceptor site in Poland, the government led by Donald Tusk also had its own “reset” designs with the Kremlin, taking what it deemed a more pragmatic approach. In the words of Prime Minister Tusk, Poland should work with “Russia as it is, not as we wish it to be.”82 Or as then Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski remarked, although Moscow continues to pursue “its own agenda,” Russia remains “a very important partner” and “our cooperation with Russia should be practical and depoliticized.”83 In this respect, Polish policy toward Russia was not substantially out of step with that of the Obama administration.

But Polish policy was not simply an echo of the Obama administration’s approach. Taking a neither too hot nor too cold approach, the government’s 2009 white paper on defense asserted that “the risk of a large-scale conflict has been drastically reduced,” while admitting that, in the wake of the Russian invasion of Georgia the previous year, “the probability of a local conflict occurring close to Poland’s border cannot be excluded.”84 Hence, it affirmed “the importance of military force” even now “in Europe’s backyard.”85

In conjunction with Sweden, Poland also took the lead to transform the EU’s moribund European Neighborhood Policy, as it related to the adjacent region, into a more focused effort with the Eastern Partnership Initiative (EaP). The Neighborhood Policy included a hodgepodge of more than a dozen countries south and east of Europe. The EaP, established in 2009, was intended to reaffirm Brussels’s commitment to Eastern Europe countries (Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova) and three South Caucasus nations (Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) by giving them access to the EU single market in exchange for the adoption of trade-related EU legislation.86

Putin’s response to creation of the EaP was to see it as a strategic subterfuge—“an alternative” to NATO expansion. According to the Russian foreign minister, it was a bid to establish a new “sphere of influence” in Russia’s backyard.87 And it was precisely the Ukrainian government’s decision in late 2013 to complete an accession agreement with the EU, then back out of signing it, that led to the Maidan protests in Kiev, the collapse of the Ukrainian government, and Russia’s subsequent invasion of Crimea and the Russian-sponsored war in Ukraine’s east.

Naturally enough, Polish pragmatism toward Moscow took on a new aspect when Russian forces invaded Ukraine and occupied and annexed part of Ukrainian sovereign territory. For Poles, these events have posed the most serious test for European security since the end of the Cold War. As much as any EU or NATO member, Warsaw has acted, in the words of the former Polish foreign minister, as
an “advocate for Ukrainian interests” in Brussels, supporting sanctions against Russia for its behavior, providing assistance for Ukraine’s military forces, and pushing for the approval of the accession agreement with the EU. Gone were any hints of accepting Russia for what “it is.” At the same time, Prime Minister Tusk, who would soon become president of the European Council, called for an EU-wide energy union in which Brussels would take the lead in negotiating energy contracts with Russia and establishing mechanisms to ensure member states would come to the assistance of other members in the event of an energy crisis precipitated by a cutoff of Russian gas or oil. Tusk further proposed development of longer-term plans to develop the infrastructure necessary to enhance diversification and security of energy supplies.

All this was directed at reducing Russian leverage over both former Warsaw Pact countries and Russia’s large oil and gas customers in Western Europe.

This hardened position toward relations with Russia has not, unsurprisingly, lessened any with the Law and Justice party’s return to power in Warsaw in 2015. Russia presents an “existential threat,” and its behavior indicates that it is “seeking a new Cold War.”
Czech Republic. The Czech Republic, since joining NATO, has been relatively sequestered from the specific security threats that have preoccupied other member states. Jihadist-inspired terrorism has not been a major concern, nor have the Czech Republic border countries—such as Ukraine, the Baltic States, or Romania—that must consider Russian military capabilities more directly. Comparatively small in population and land mass, the Czech Republic is also too small to believe its own strategic capabilities can make a decisive difference in addressing European and transatlantic security concerns and, when push comes to shove, to guarantee its own security absent working ties to Europe and the United States. In recent years, all of this has resulted in a mix of statements from Prague that are neither consistently harsh nor forgiving of Russian behavior.

This mix is animated by economic factors as well. The Czech economy depends heavily on exports, and after the turn of the century, exports to Russia and exports to other countries that then send finished products to Russia steadily rose—that is, until the EU and US imposed sanctions on select Russian companies and individuals after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Given the Czech Republic’s uneven and, at times, negative GDP growth rates after 2006, Prague is reluctant to permanently burn its trade bridges to Russia.

In its semi-insulated state, neither major Czech party—not the left-wing Social Democrats nor the right-wing Civic Democrats—saw Russia as a potential threat to the Czech Republic until after Ukraine, as seen in their respective white papers on national security and defense issues. From 2002 to 2012, Prague described the prospects of a conventional threat as “highly unlikely” or “low,” with the security environment being generally “favorable.” Not until the 2015 security strategy was the country’s situation described as “worsening” in the immediate neighborhood. Yet even so, the document does not explicitly
mention the state that is “seek[ing] to carve out for themselves exclusive spheres of influence by means of the neighboring countries.”

Reminiscent of the story Goldilocks and the Three Bears, Czech leaders have been all over the map when it comes to Russia. For example, Czech President Milos Zeman has made statements too warm and too sympathetic to the Russian position on Ukraine—among them, opposing sanctions on Russia, calling the dispute with Ukraine a “civil war,” raising doubts about whether Russia had any hand in war in eastern Ukraine, and participating in Moscow-sponsored events that were seen as at odds with Brussels’ attempt to present a united front against Kremlin policies.

In contrast, Czech Foreign Minister Lubomir Zaoralek has taken a much cooler approach to Czech-Russian relations, comparing Russian actions in Ukraine and the Crimea to Nazi Germany’s annexation of the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia in 1938. Early in the crisis, the ministry expressed support for Kiev and, in general, has made clear that, for its part, ties between Prague and Moscow should be tied to the Kremlin’s willingness to abide by international norms and to respect the territorial integrity of surrounding countries. Similarly, Czech Defense Minister Martin Stropnicky has stated that, when it comes to other Russian interventions, “by no means” could one rule out “Russian intervention in some NATO or EU member states” in the future.

Prague’s foreign minister has also raised the problem of Russian attempts to influence the domestic politics of other European states with its financial support to political parties, while the interior ministry has set up a team to track Russian-sourced influence on Czech social networks and domestic media. As for Czech Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka, he has attempted to find something of a middle path. On the one hand, he has criticized President Zeman’s statements and kept Prague in line with Berlin and Brussels’ policy on sanctions. On the other hand, at least initially, he has worked to protect Czech machinery exports from the impact of sanctions and quietly allowed the Czech ministry in charge of trade and industry to keep contacts open with Russia with the assumption that Russia will be a priority market down the road.

The “to and fro” is captured by the defense minister warning of the Russian threat but also suggesting that the stationing of US forces on Czech soil would be problematic in light of the public’s memory of the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and that Europe’s policy should not be to isolate Russia. In this regard, Prague appears generally to take its cues for its approach toward Moscow from Berlin—keeping within the EU consensus of supporting sanctions but being careful to take steps that could be easily reversed if a new policy of detente with Russia emerges.

Hungary. Although it shares a narrow border with Ukraine, Hungary, like the Czech Republic, is geographically distant from the Russian threat—approximately 800 miles from the fighting in eastern Ukraine—and buffered by neighboring states to the east and north. Well before the Russian invasion of Crimea, but after the invasion of Georgia, the Hungarian national security strategy declared that the country faced no conventional threat and did not consider any particular country an adversary or even potential adversary. Indeed, current Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in the midst of the Crimea crisis distanced his country from the dispute, saying: “Hungary is not part of the conflict.”

Much of Budapest’s focus since then has been on keeping commercial and trade ties with Russia as open as possible, repeatedly noting that sanctions had harmed Hungarian trade with Russia and, where possible, continuing to make deals with Russian firms and state-controlled companies. In meetings with Putin in 2015 and 2016, Orbán said, “Hungary needs Russia”; “Russia is not our enemy,” but “our partner.” He further explained, “Russia is offering Hungary the opportunity to become a partner, which is a prerequisite to our economic success.”

Russia’s portion of Hungary’s total imports is somewhat higher than the Czech Republic’s but lower than Poland’s. Hungary, like the Czech Republic, slowly increased exports from 2003 until more recent years. That said, like the Czech Republic and Germany, the export percentage never reached 4 percent during that period. In fact, in 2011, well before the war
in Ukraine and the imposition of sanctions, the value of exports to Russia from Hungary began to decrease and has continued its downward track since. In short, it is certainly an open question of how critical Russia actually is to Hungary’s economic “success” now or in the future.

If Russia is a key factor in Hungary’s economic performance, it is because of the country’s dependence on Russia for energy. However, rather than reduce that dependence and the attendant potential risks, Orbán has been willing to deepen energy ties on the assumption that forming a more cooperative, less adversarial relationship with the Kremlin than other neighboring states have will increase Moscow’s incentives to keep energy flowing. The “price” for doing so has included Orbán meeting with Putin three times over the past three years, cutting off reverse gas flows to Ukraine, committing to a new long-term gas contract with Gazprom, signing a less-than-transparent agreement with Rosatom to build new nuclear power plants, and forming sweetheart deals with friends of Putin in Hungary’s transportation and domestic energy sector. From the Russian point of view, relations with Hungary are, in the words of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, “good and pragmatical.”

If Hungarian policies toward Russia were merely good and pragmatical, one could suggest they were not all that different from, say, Paris’ relationship with Moscow during the Cold War. The French were not above taking advantage of the tension between Washington and the Soviet Union at times to establish a more advantageous set of ties with the Kremlin. But Orbán’s policies toward Russia are also colored by his dismissal of modern liberalism and his willingness to put forward illiberal regimes such as Putin’s Russia, Xi’s China, and Erdogan’s Turkey as models of sound governance. While the Hungarian government has been careful not to break openly with Brussels or Washington over Russian sanctions, Orbán’s attitude toward his own allies and the West more broadly makes Hungary a weak link when it comes to transatlantic solidarity and Russia.
The Visegrad Effect

Twenty-five years ago, the governments of Poland, Hungary, and then Czechoslovakia issued the Visegrad Declaration in which the countries agreed to work together to promote their respective independence and democracies with the goal of “full involvement in the European political and economic system, as well as the system of security and legislation.”104 Now made up of four states following the peaceful division of Czechoslovakia into the separate Czech and Slovak republics, the Visegrad Group has effectively met that goal having obtained membership in both NATO and the European Union more than a decade ago. But the Visegrad “process” lives on, with regular meetings of the heads of state and key ministries continuing to this day. Sometimes dismissed as too informal or too small to have much impact on decision making in Brussels, the Visegrad effort has nevertheless created a consensus-building dynamic among the four states that, at a minimum, appears to limit the publicly acceptable from the unacceptable in key policy areas.

Since the earliest days of the Ukraine crisis, the Visegrad Four (V4) have sounded their support for Ukraine’s territorial integrity and the need for the EU to move forward with the association agreement with Kiev, while reiterating their view that Russia’s annexation of Crimea violated international law and challenges Europe’s security.105 Under the Visegrad umbrella, the member governments have also signaled their support for moving forward with the EU’s energy union plan, completing an internal energy market, and completing the North-South Gas Corridor.106 Although not a V4 effort per se, the Visegrad countries have made up the core of the capitals who have regularly objected to the proposed Nord Stream II project as potentially destabilizing to both Ukraine and European security.107 Noteworthy as well is the V4 creation of an EU battlegroup, which consisted of elements from all four militaries and was on call for possible deployment by Brussels for the first six months of 2016.108

Similar to NATO at the end of the Cold War, the purpose of continuing the Visegrad process was questioned once all four states had gained membership in the EU and NATO. Similar to NATO, once the initial, defining goal had been reached, other policy initiatives were bound to be examined through the lens of each state’s particular foreign and domestic interests. The combination of decision making by consensus and the lack of a common strategic vision among the V4 will inevitably limit how deep and far-reaching cooperation can be. For example, where there was a common interest in supporting Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, the V4 were active, issuing five joint statements on the Ukraine crisis in the first three months of 2014 alone.109 They also agreed to rotate military forces through the Baltics in 2017 as part of “reassurance” exercises for those allied states.110 But where there was no consensus about how to deal with Russia itself, the V4 as a collective have been silent on the matter of sanctions. Similarly, given the divergent views about the level of threat posed by Russia and the security environment in general, progress on joint V4 military projects, outside of the one-time creation of the battlegroup, has been minimal.111

Individually, Slovakia and the Czech Republic have seen the V4 process as a tool to leverage their smaller size within Europe into a larger voice. Hungary has a similar interest but also sees the V4 as a means to lessen its isolation within the transatlantic community. As for Poland, its interest in the V4 has waxed and waned over the years. As the largest and most economically dynamic country within the V4, Warsaw has been somewhat skeptical of the value of working with the three smaller states, believing instead that it has more to gain by associating with Berlin, Paris, and even Moscow at times. A poll conducted in 2015 of nearly 2,000 government officials, journalists, business leaders, and policy experts from the V4 dramatically showed this disjunction. The other V4 states ranked Poland as the third most important international partner nation, but Poles were substantially less sanguine about the Visegrad Group’s utility.112

More recently, however, Warsaw has seen the V4 in a more positive light given the need to marshal a more collective approach to Russia—connecting the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic Seas into one geostrategic space—and develop common policy positions on internal EU
matters such as migration within the EU, refugees from outside the EU, and domestic governance. Yet as dominant as Poland might appear in comparison with the other V4 members, it is a tail that cannot wag the dog. Neither Prague nor Bratislava is interested in an agenda that puts them at odds too directly with either Berlin or Brussels. And Budapest, while willing to challenge, like Warsaw, the EU’s views on what constitutes acceptable rules of domestic governance, is not in step with Poland on the threat posed by Putin’s Russia.\textsuperscript{113}

That said, the Visegrad process unquestionably helped the four “new” states of Europe move into the liberal, transatlantic community. It receives perhaps too little credit for mitigating tensions that historically have divided Central Europe. But as seen, there is a limit to what the V4 can do, or be expected to do, in the absence of a shared geostrategic vision.

The End of the “End of History”

Spurred on by the incentive of joining the ranks of the European Union and NATO, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic made striking progress in adopting political and economic policies that aligned with the liberal ideals that marked the immediate post–Cold War period. In many respects, they were individually and collectively the poster children, the model states, for what many hoped would become a Europe “whole and free.” In the security arena, the expectation was that, having just come out from under the despotic rule imposed by Communist Moscow, they, in particular, would be open to the idea that their core “national” interest included sustaining the wider liberal international order. Moreover, their commitment to that order, observers hoped, would be infectious, spurring the transatlantic community to follow suit. For a variety of reasons, though, that hope remains unfilled.

This is not to say that “new” Europe has simply become an ally of dubious utility, but merely that the pull of traditional factors—geography, economics, domestic politics, and domestic security—have once again come to the fore to shape their behavior and strategic outlooks. Precisely because each of the countries has had distinct recent experiences on the domestic and international fronts and has a unique geographic position within Central Europe, they each assess their country’s interests differently in the security and international arena.

Poland. Of the three nations, Poland has traditionally shown the most robust commitment to the transatlantic community. It has been suggested that this derives from both the very large diaspora of Poles living in the United States and the fact that Polish civil society was more fully developed and more tied to the West (overtly and covertly) before the end of the Soviet era than were Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Despite significant and growing trade relations with Russia before the invasion and annexation of Crimea, Warsaw willingly sacrificed that interest in the name of supporting Ukraine and pushed to keep in place sanctions against Russia. As noted earlier, Poland has also been at the forefront of efforts to reduce regional dependence on Russian energy supplies. It has also deployed smaller, noncombat military contingents in both Afghanistan and Kuwait to assist with the fight against the Taliban and ISIS.\textsuperscript{114} Warsaw was quick to respond to the call from NATO to bolster Baltic air policing by supplying fighter jets in the face of Russian aerial provocations.\textsuperscript{115}

Of course, geography has mattered as well. Of the three states, only Poland has a border with Russia: the Kaliningrad enclave. It also is a neighbor of the Baltic States, the three NATO members most under threat from Russia and whose security (or lack thereof) most directly affects Poland’s own. Of course, as a neighbor of Ukraine, Warsaw is particularly interested in seeing, at a minimum, stability there and, more ambitiously, a country reformed and tied to the West. Given Putin’s critical statements about NATO and the “tragic” collapse of the Soviet empire, and his decisions to invade Ukraine and Georgia, Poles can be expected to prioritize strengthening Polish defenses and emphasizing the need to address regional security issues. As the results of a Pew poll in 2015 reflect, Polish attitudes and preferred policies toward Russia and Ukraine...
outstrip those of NATO populations further west (see Table 4).

With a defense budget that only recently rose above 2 percent of GDP and, while increasing, will not approach 3 percent anytime soon, Warsaw has increasingly focused on the Russia question; it has become less interested in engaging in out-of-area operations or dealing with concerns or threats posed to other alliance members from regions other than the east.\(^{116}\) Perhaps the most notable example of this change in the Polish attitude was the decision not to join the 2011 NATO campaign against Gadhafi’s forces in Libya—a policy decision that meant turning away from its traditionally closest allies, the US and the UK, and siding with Germany in this particular case.

**Czech Republic.** Popular support among the Czech population for joining NATO was never on the order of the support in Poland. Indeed, according to polling data, while a bare majority of Czechs supported the government’s decision to become a NATO member, of the three states the Czech Republic had the highest proportion of those who would have voted “no” in a national vote on joining the alliance.\(^{117}\) Public opinion polls in recent years reflect this ambiguity over NATO membership and policies. In the late 2000s, the public opposed the government’s decision to support the Bush administration’s plans to install a missile-defense radar in the country.\(^{118}\) More recently, however, polls indicate that the public does not support the pro-Russian statements of the current Czech president, while Czechs responded to the US Army’s Dragoon Ride through the Czech Republic in the spring of 2015 with both pro- and anti-American rallies.\(^{119}\)

In part, this ambiguity about NATO reflects to some degree the Czech sense that, as a relatively small nation, the country will inevitably be under the push and pull of larger powers, whether Russia, Germany, or the United States. The smaller power–larger power dynamic was probably one reason, as a RAND study pointed out:

Most Czechs interpreted Operation Allied Force, NATO’s action against Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic’s repression of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, as a relapse into Cold War patterns of behavior and an aggression by a military alliance against a sovereign country.\(^{120}\)

It might also account for why, in the spring of 2014, when the alliance was beginning to debate how it might shore up defenses in Central and Eastern

### Table 4. Polish Public Opinion Polls

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Poland</th>
<th>Other NATO Countries*</th>
<th>Difference</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Russia is a major military threat to neighboring countries</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>–21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia is to blame for violence in eastern Ukraine</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>–20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfavorable view of Russia</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>–13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase economic sanctions on Russia</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>–24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for NATO sending arms to Ukrainian government</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>–10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for Ukraine becoming a NATO member</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>–2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for Western countries providing economic aid to Ukraine</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>–9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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* Median includes Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the UK, and the US.

Europe in the wake of the Ukraine crisis, the Czech defense minister dismissed the idea of a NATO troop presence on Czech soil, resurrecting memories of the Soviet troop “presence” post-1968.121

On the positive side of the ledger, NATO accession requirements were seen as a practical guarantee that the country would remain democratic in its post-Communist transition and, with NATO membership sealed, would clear a path for Czech membership in the EU. In short, much of the underlying case for Czech integration in the transatlantic alliance had less to do with Czech security, narrowly speaking, than with the country’s efforts to solidify its liberal transition and embed itself in the democratic West. This perspective aligned well with Czech support in the post-Soviet era for human rights more broadly.

Betwixt and between it seems, the Czech Republic is an outlier among NATO allies in Central Europe in not hosting a force integration unit, the small headquarters element designed to facilitate rapid deployment of NATO forces to the eastern part of the alliance. At the same time, Czech forces remain involved in train and assist missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, with the latter connected to the domestically produced light fighters the Czechs sold to the Iraqi air force.122

In the 2015 poll of the V4 policy elite and commentators, Czech respondents ranked Germany as the most important partner to Czech foreign policy, followed by Poland and then the United States.123 Given Berlin’s and Warsaw’s roles in the region, Berlin’s role in the EU, and the EU’s day-to-day impact on the continent’s affairs, the ranking is no surprise. But polls also show over 60 percent of Czechs want their leaders to strengthen NATO ties.124 Moreover, with widespread displeasure over the EU’s plan for distributing the massive flow of refugees from Africa and the Middle East among member states, one-third of Czech citizens now consider NATO membership more important than EU membership, while half see it as equally important.125 Approval for NATO membership has never been as high.

Hungary. In the case of Hungary, the 2015 poll of V4 policy elite reveals that Hungarian respondents held a relatively positive view of Russia. Although Germany and the United States were still thought to be the two most important partners for Hungary, Russia placed third—and not a distant third. Polish and Czech responses, by contrast, listed Russia substantially lower.126 When asked to rank the quality of their relations with other countries, the Poles and Czechs placed Russia last out of 17 states, but Hungarian respondents placed Russia fourth, while the United States and Ukraine fell to 15th and 16th, respectively.127

Among the three states, the Hungarian government is the clear outlier in relations with Russia. Originally a liberal party composed of anti-communists, Fidesz, the governing party of Hungary, has moved increasingly to the nationalist and populist right over the past two decades. But as late as 2008, the party’s leader and current Prime Minister Viktor Orbán was an outspoken critic of Vladimir Putin, condemning the Russian invasion of Georgia as a form of imperialism, comparing it with the Russian suppression of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and arguing for Georgian membership in NATO.128 Why the change?

In part, Hungary’s uneven, or worse, economic performance over the past decade, combined with its dependence on Russian energy supplies, has led Orbán’s government to take a “pragmatic” approach toward Moscow. Indeed, in 2016, Pew found that more than two-thirds of Hungarians polled favored having “a strong economic relationship with Russia” over being “tough with Russia on foreign policy disputes.”129 Budapest sees Russian investments and the Russian market as important for its own domestic well-being—as well as, if reports are correct, a source of resources for cronies of both Putin and Orbán. More importantly, on the domestic political front, Fidesz moved further to the right in response to the growth of Jobbik, the radical Hungarian nationalist party. With electoral victories in 2010 and 2014, Orbán has adopted a domestic agenda that is majoritarian and illiberal. Confounding Hungary’s NATO allies, Orbán implicitly legitimated Moscow’s rationale for invading Crimea and protecting Russian ethnics living there by calling for autonomy for ethnic Hungarians living in Ukraine in the midst of the crisis.130
However, the Hungarian government, while consistently pushing the envelope when doing business with Russia and Putin, has not openly broken with the EU or the United States on sanctions, contributed to the Baltic air policing effort, participated (if only marginally) in regional NATO-supported military exercises, agreed to host a NATO force integration unit, provided the base for and participated in the NATO Strategic Airlift Capability initiative, and kept small noncombat train and assist units in Afghanistan and Iraqi Kurdistan.\(^{131}\)

Arguably, this is because, while Orbán had a governing majority in Hungary, no actual majority in Hungary favors decisively breaking from the two most important liberal, multilateral institutions: NATO and the EU.\(^{132}\) Recent polls show greater Hungarian support for both than one might expect after several years of the government’s assertive nationalism. While not reaching the height of the 85 percent that voted in a 1997 national referendum for Hungary to join NATO, some 57 percent of Hungarians in a recent Pew poll had a favorable view of NATO, and nearly a third wanted to increase defense spending.\(^{133}\) Similarly, Hungarians still, despite the refugee debate, support further EU integration, with almost two-thirds in favor of a “common” EU foreign and defense policy.\(^{134}\) Indeed, according to one recent poll, “Hungarians on the whole have greater trust” in “European-wide institutions” than “in the Hungarian parliament and government.”\(^{135}\)

**Conclusion**

At the height of America’s “unipolar” moment in the late 1990s, it was not surprising that expectations about NATO’s prospective new members were high. They would, the thought was, provide momentum for a strategic vision of transatlantic relations that saw the alliance as the cornerstone for expanding and sustaining a liberal international order. After all, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic had each lived under the thumb of one-party communist rule for a half-century, and each had memories of the Soviet Union and its domestic puppets suppressing their respective efforts at self-rule. They were countries where a generation of dissidents and future leaders listened to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty for news and stored up a significant amount of goodwill toward the United States in particular for its staunch stand against Soviet Communism.

To be clear, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic are fundamentally different countries. The dividing lines and tensions that defined Central Europe for generation after generation are indeed things of the past. In the security arena, there is no question about such matters of civilian control of the military or even their militaries’ desires to work with their transatlantic allies.

But generations change and, with that change, so do perceived interests. Indeed, it is plausible to argue that the successful integration of the three countries into first NATO and then the EU actually created the very peace and stability that lessened the priority given to transatlantic ties. For citizens and elected officials alike, on a day-to-day basis, policies put forward by the European Commission and decided on by the European Council were typically more important and more immediately impactful than the occasional NATO summit or a meeting of the alliance’s North Atlantic Council.

Of course, US policies have not helped keep transatlantic ties tight. Under the Bush administration, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were fought in a manner that brought little credit to the Polish, Hungarian, and Czech politicians who supported the wars in the face of unsure publics and less-than-obvious connections to their own country’s security. As for the Obama administration, it was an issue not of asking more from Europe but of signaling a waning interest in Europe’s role as a strategic partner and, for several years, putting a priority on “resetting” relations with Putin’s Russia.

However, if expectations for Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic were once too optimistic, the problem in recent years is expecting too little. Russian behavior has changed how the publics in each country assess the transatlantic alliance: most obviously in Poland whose geographic position makes it the most vulnerable. But this change, to the degree
there is one, is tied to a particular threat that may not exist a decade from now. It is impossible to predict how a Russia governed by a mafia-like don, with deep-seated demographic and economic problems, can maintain its ambitious agenda.

What is required is a broader argument—one that understands both Russian behavior as a direct assault against a liberal global order and the value of a transatlantic security regime that anchors that order. Such an approach would require politicians and senior officials in Brussels, Prague, Budapest, and Warsaw to consistently remind their publics that the prosperity and peace they have come to expect rests on maintaining global stability. Although what happens “out of area” may not at first be of interest to Poles, Hungarians, and Czechs, such crises will likely sooner or later affect their countries, as the refugee crisis suggests. Even if they do not directly affect Prague, Budapest, and Warsaw, but take up the time and resources of the United States or other major allies, that too will ultimately be of interest. An America tied up with problems in the Middle East or East Asia with too little allied support will likely be an America with too few resources to prevent a security vacuum in Europe that the likes of a Putin or others could exploit. In short, the divisions between collective defense, collective security, and crisis management are not hard and fast, and over time they are really mutually complementary.

Meeting or, better yet, exceeding the 2 percent floor for defense spending on an annual basis is surely not a cure-all for everything that ails the transatlantic alliance. But it would be an important signal to Washington and the American public that the alliance does matter, and no less important, it would require government leaders in Prague, Warsaw, and Budapest to justify to their publics and themselves the importance of doing so. Maybe it would not go so far as to make New Europe “new” again, but it would be a useful first step in renewing and deepening ties.

About the Author

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Notes

3. The five other states signing the letter were the UK, Denmark, Spain, Portugal, and Italy. “Statement of the Vilnius Countries,” the second missive, was issued on February 6 and signed by Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Romania, Slovenia, and Slovakia. All 10 eventually became NATO members.
4. Initially, neither the Bush nor the Clinton administrations believed NATO expansion was a priority. The case for enlargement was at first driven by the countries of Central Europe, believing NATO membership was key to ensuring they were thought of and were part of “the West.” See, in general, Ronald D. Asmus, Opening NATO’s Door: How the Alliance Remade Itself for a New Era (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
6. Leiden University, The Kosovo Conflict in the Polls, 2007, 84, http://media.leidenuniv.nl/legacy/Poll%20Data%20Kosovo.pdf. While the Hungarian government opened its airspace for NATO’s air campaign, it signaled its unwillingness to allow Hungarian territory to be used if a ground invasion became necessary. Karen Donfried, “Kosovo: International Reactions to NATO Air Strikes,” Congressional Research Service, April 21, 1999, https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=451447. This reluctance to allow NATO forces to use Hungarian territory was somewhat of a change in attitude from Hungary’s 1995 decision to allow NATO use of its bases as staging areas for implementation of the Dayton peace accords. Asmus, Opening NATO’s Door, 129.
7. Ibid., 84.

17. Ibid., 128.


30. Ibid.


32. Ibid.


37. It has been argued that one reason for the decline in the Hungarian government’s willingness to sustain a reasonable defense
burden after joining NATO was the fiscal and budgetary pressures tied to the follow-on efforts to join the EU. But as Peter Marton and Peter Wagner point out, that decline, until just recently, was never reversed. Peter Marton and Peter Wagner, “The Impact of Hungary’s NATO Membership,” 139.


42. Csiki, “Lessons Learnt and Unlearnt.”

43. Ibid.


49. European Commission, “Member State General Situation According the Significance of Impact.”


67. Dickel et al., Reducing European Dependence on Russian Gas, 10.

68. Harrison and Princova, “A Quiet Gas Revolution in Central and Eastern Europe.”


transatlanticacademy.org/node/771.


85. Ibid., 4.

86. For more information, see Piotr Buns, “Poland and the Eastern Partnership: The View from Warsaw,” European Council on Foreign Relations, May 19, 2015, http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_poland_and_the_eastern_partnership_the_view_from_warsaw3038.


113. Buckley and Foy, “The Visegrad Four.”


116. “Polish expectations on NATO’s future evolution can be summarized as going back to roots, both geographically and functionally.” Marek Madej, “Poland and NATO’s Future—Let’s Get Serious About the Basics,” in *Newcomers No More?*, 132.


121. Muller, “Czech Defense Minister Sees No NATO Troops Stationed on Czech Soil.”


124. Carney, “On Russia, Poll Shows Divisions Between Czechs and Their President.”


127. Ibid., 26.


130. Andrew Gardner, “Orbán to Ukraine: Give Hungarians Autonomy,” *Politico*, May 15, 2014, http://www.politico.eu/article/orban-to-ukraine-give-hungarians-autonomy/. However, as Jackson Diehl has pointed out, Orbán’s “nationalism” has a bit longer history than recent events, with his government in 2002, in the midst of a heated political campaign, passing a controversial “status law” that called for special treatment for Hungarian minorities living in neighboring countries, including creation of a pseudo-territorial arrangement that would tie those minorities to Hungary’s economy.


132. Not surprisingly, reflecting popular opinion about both economic ties to Russia and NATO’s commitment to the territorial integrity of its members, Orbán has said, “We will be doves in the field of the economy but we will be hawks when it comes to security policy.” Quoted in Marton and Wagner, “The Impact of Hungary’s Membership,” 151.

133. Poushter et al., “Europeans Face the World Divided,” 25 and 44.


135. Ibid. In an early 2016 poll conducted by the GLOBSEC Policy Institute, while nearly half of the Hungarians polled indicated that they preferred their country’s geopolitical orientation to lay somewhere between “east” and “west,” 47 percent believed NATO membership was “a good thing,” and 78 percent said NATO membership was “good for our country security.” Only 8 percent and 6 percent believed EU and NATO membership, respectively, were a “bad thing.” GLOBSEC Policy Institute, “Central Europe Under the Fire of Propaganda: Public Opinion Poll Analysis in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia,” September 2016, 7–8, http://www.cepolicy.org/sites/cepolicy.org/files/attachments/glb_trends_en.pdf.