

SECURITY INSIGHTS



Democracy and the Transatlantic Community: The Role of Central Europe

By Matthew Rhodes and Michał Baranowski

Introduction

The Warsaw office of the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF), the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies (GCMC), and the Transatlantic Academy (TA) jointly organized an international conference on “Democracy and the Future of the Transatlantic Community” in Warsaw, Poland on 21 May 2013. The event’s timing and location reflected a new wave of concern with democracy’s health (as articulated in TA’s in-depth research report, “The Democratic Disconnect,” released earlier the same month), reflection by the GMF and GCMC on the title topics prompted by milestone anniversaries of their foundings (forty and twenty years, respectively), and the intensified activism in this area by Poland and other countries in Central Europe (as exemplified by the establishment of the new European Endowment for Democracy).

This paper draws freely on discussions at the Warsaw conference in an attempt to capture and extend their major points. The scale of present problems does not doom democracy’s future. Though there are no quick fixes, well-focused efforts can yet revitalize the transatlantic community’s internal politics as well as its external support for democratic development.

The State of Democracy and its Promotion

The report TA presented at the conference opens with the sentence: “Democracy is in trouble.” Exhibit A for this conclusion remains the lingering effects of the post-2008 financial crisis. These have reflected and amplified polarization and gridlock in the United States, nationalist populism, and fraying solidarity within the European Union, and a decade-long plateau if not decline

in the global spread of freedom. In Europe’s surrounding neighborhoods, autocratic and hybrid regimes remain entrenched across a post-Soviet space dominated by an increasingly repressive Russia while the Arab Spring threatens to devolve into a mix of old regime resistance, illiberal Islamist rule, and anarchic violence. Meanwhile, higher growth and surface stability within a rising China cast further doubt on the benefits of democratic governance.

Parallel “fatigue” has sapped enthusiasm for external democracy promotion. The term’s association with forcible regime-change in Iraq continues to cast a shadow. The gap between the limited subsequent results and the human and financial costs involved there and in Afghanistan have likewise pushed large-scale nation-building off the international agenda. Austerity has hit budgets for diplomacy, development, and defense engagement, the last even as new studies reemphasize armed forces’ key role in democratic transitions.¹ Meanwhile, new democratically-conditioned NATO and EU enlargement, the most successful post-Cold War tool in this field, is limited both by members’ internal preoccupations and the smaller remaining pool of ready candidates.²

This standard summary is sobering but requires some countervailing perspective. Democracy’s condition today is clearly less precarious than in the 1930s and arguably no worse than at the outset of Huntington’s “Third Wave” in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In that latter period, industrialized democracies experienced post-oil shock stagflation. The United States suffered from post-Vietnam, post-Watergate “malaise.” “Eurosclerosis” beset the continent’s West, while martial law in Poland again reversed nascent liberalization in the East. Globally, Soviet-backed Marxists were on the march across the Third World.

¹ See Zoltan Barany, *The Soldier and the Changing State: Building Democratic Armies in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas* (Princeton, 2012) and Dennis Blair (ed.), *Military Engagement: Influencing Armed Forces Worldwide to Support Democratic Transitions* (Brookings, 2013).

² See Ronald Asmus, “Europe’s Eastern Promise: Rethinking NATO and EU Enlargement,” *Foreign Affairs*, January February 2008.

Yet within a decade, the outlook had reversed. The Cold War ended. The Single European Act and Maastricht Treaty re-energized the integration project. The U.S. attained unipolar preeminence and started its longest peacetime economic expansion. NATO and the EU opened their doors to over a dozen new members. For the first time in history, a majority of the world's states embraced at least electoral democracy.

Glimmers of improvement (at least compared to the lowest points of the past few years) also apply to more recent negative trends. Within the United States, a recovering economy and the conclusion of the 2012 elections have slightly tempered the intensity and effects of political polarization. Growth remains slower and more fragile in Europe, but the European Central Bank and other EU bodies have averted a eurozone breakup while achieving compromise on a new seven-year EU budget, laying the groundwork for a banking union, and collecting the Nobel Peace Prize. The EU-mediated, U.S.-backed framework agreement between Serbia and Kosovo in April 2013 advanced integration in the Balkans. Farther afield, reform in Burma could presage broader democratic breakthroughs in East Asia.³

To be sure, this relative progress remains partial, and the experience from democracy's last rough patch, which gave way to a heady golden age, is no guarantee that contemporary problems will prove equally transient. Persistent "politics of scarcity," driven by accumulated debt, aging societies, and/or climate change, could negate democratic revival. Other technological and societal shifts may further undermine the integrative effects of cohesive identities and formal institutions within modern democracies. Chinese-style market authoritarianism might present a more durably dynamic alternative than Soviet communism, while simultaneous weaknesses of states and societies could leave hybrid regimes the norm in Eastern Europe and Eurasia. Such factors present a formidable collective challenge. On balance, however, there are enough similarities between democracy's past and present tests to treat even the differences as potentially surmountable.

The Role of Central Europe

Over the past quarter century, the countries of Central Europe have served as models of successful democratic change and champions of intensified democracy support. As the largest and most strategically-minded state in the region, Poland has been out front in both respects; Germany's leading news magazine recently dubbed it the "miracle next door."⁴ However, a more critical than romantic view of these functions can best help the region further democracy's cause.

1989 yielded two chief lessons for later democratization. First, authoritarian rule is frequently more brittle than it seems. Second, active civil societies are the key to democratic breakthroughs and consolidation. Both points

seemingly fit the movements against illiberal nationalist leaderships in Slovakia, Croatia, and Serbia at the turn of the millennium as well as the Color Revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan a few years later. Veteran Central European activists shared their experience with counterparts in the former, while officials such as Polish President Aleksander Kwasniewski acted as mediators during Ukraine's Orange Revolution among the latter.

Over the following years, Central European governments and NGOs extended and institutionalized their efforts. The Visegrad Four states (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) most explicitly embraced democracy as a foreign policy priority, including through their joint V4 framework. To their north, the three Baltic states have been especially active regarding the South Caucasus. To their south, independent groups such as Serbia's Center for Applied Non-Violent Action and Strategies (CANVAS) have shared lessons of the 1990s resistance to Milosevic with activists from Egypt to Burma.⁵

In the face of fatigue elsewhere, Central Europe has also emerged as a center of gravity for broader multilateral democracy initiatives. One prominent example is the European Union's Eastern Partnership program with six post-Soviet neighbors, a Polish-Swedish proposal launched during the Czech Republic's EU Presidency in spring 2009. The Warsaw-based Community of Democracies has been another key project: Poland sought to revitalize the body with a tenth anniversary ministerial in Krakow in July 2010; Lithuania served as its chair from mid-2009 to mid-2011; and the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Romania join those two countries on its 25-member Governing Council. Along with identifying Tunisia and Moldova as priority countries for assistance during its EU Presidency in the second half of 2011, Poland also proposed the EU's new European Endowment for Democracy, which is now beginning operations; backing from other newer members helped overcome the skepticism of traditional powers such as France and Great Britain.

The types of negative developments detailed earlier have, however, also challenged the hopeful narrative of the region's role. The progression from revolutionary change to ordinary politics dimmed some of Central Europe's inspirational appeal. Cases of high-level corruption and other examples of illiberal politics have fueled critiques of intra-regional "backsliding."⁶ Most recently, the European Commission and U.S. State Department rebuked government actions in Hungary and Romania that weakened the independence of other state bodies.

Parallel questions apply to the region's role as a reference point for others. Most of the Soviet successor states and those in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have lacked similarly robust civil societies and/or broad-based movements with clear, consensual leadership along the lines of Solidarity and Lech Walesa in Poland or Civic Forum/Public Against Violence and Vaclav Havel in the former Czechoslovakia. Overlooking

³ See Diamond, Larry, "The Coming Wave," *Journal of Democracy*, January 2012.

⁴ Erich Follath and Erich Puhl, "Das Wunder von nebenan," *Der Spiegel*, May 21, 2012.

⁵ Tina Rosenberg, "Revolution U: What Egypt Learned from the Students who Overthrew Milosevic," *ForeignPolicy.com*, February 16, 2011.

⁶ Charles Gati, "Backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe," testimony before Foreign Affairs Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives, July 25, 2007.

this difference exaggerated expectations for spontaneous democratization in post-Taliban Afghanistan and post-Baathist Iraq. Likewise, the absence of EU membership perspective from the Eastern Partnership has limited incentives for participating governments to commit to reforms.

Central European democracy promoters have thus encountered difficulties in several of the countries where they have been most actively engaged. For example, post-election violence by the regime of President Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus following elections in December 2010 and the criminal conviction of former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko in Ukraine in October 2011 exemplified regression rather than progress. Even the Eastern Partnership's star pupil, Moldova, recently saw the collapse of its pro-European coalition government.

Recommendations

As the preceding sections attest, grounds for guarded optimism about democracy's prospects coexist with real frustrations. Realizing the more positive potential will require fresh commitment. The following five mutually reinforcing recommendations offer basic orientation for further efforts.

Keep Democracy on the Agenda

First is the need to maintain focus on democracy as a priority issue. Though neither the only nor always overriding matter of concern, its compelling moral and long-term strategic importance calls for serious attention both in general and within specific contexts. It should not be overlooked, taken for granted, or casually dismissed in dealing with the other urgent topics crowding policymakers' in-boxes.

From a top-down perspective, highly-placed champions within governments and international organizations are especially helpful in setting a tone in this regard. However, from the bottom up this is also a task for members of parliament, civic leaders, NGO activists, journalists, scholars, and individual citizens. The regular reports issued by Freedom House are an important example here. Also noteworthy is TA's intent to follow up its domestic-level Democratic Disconnect publication with an internationally-focused companion project over the coming year. Conferences of the type that sparked this paper should likewise be recurring events.

Make Internal Renewal a Security Priority

In addition to harming its own publics' well-being, the transatlantic community's internal problems have—more than any other factor—damaged its ability to inspire and support democracy elsewhere. As noted, some hopeful signs of improvement exist, but demographic and other trends promise additional pressures in the decades to come. Building sustained momentum in this context requires

effectively framing reform as the serious national security issue that it is.

There are potential downsides to “securitization” of additional policy fields. Arguments here should not stifle the open debate that is part of democracy's essence, though security may in any case have become less a political trump card than it was in the past. Still, it is important to articulate the interrelated ways that democracies' ability to defend their core interests within a favorable global environment depends on well-functioning internal systems that project competence and generate broadly shared opportunity. Communicating in this way can catalyze needed policy action by overcoming inertia and putting narrow partisan or vested interests on the defensive. Existing official steps in this direction, such as “National Renewal” in the title of the 2010 U.S. National Security Strategy, have been neither specific and focused enough concerning external connections nor followed up in a sustained manner that gains wider public attention.

The specific measures to be adopted in the name of renewal will of course themselves be intensely debated. Regarding economics, greater pragmatism rather than ideological rigidity on behalf of austerity or stimulus would more likely lead to growth. No silver bullets exist for politics either, but the types of modest changes to electoral laws and legislative procedures proposed by scholars such as Thomas Mann and Norman Orenstein could improve the odds for responsive policy action.⁸ Such adjustments are even trickier in Europe given the interplay between EU and national levels of governance, but reliance on unanchored technocratic management seems to have reached its limits.⁸ Systems on both sides of the Atlantic will also need to incorporate social media and other new technologies more creatively.

Pursue Structural, Whole-of-Society Strategies

Successful democratization depends on complex factors within a given country and cannot be imposed from outside. With that in mind, in addition to working with political leaderships, external democracy support should seek to shape more favorable contexts for democracy through structural approaches that build links among societies. The question of how strictly or loosely to apply conditionality for different types of assistance will remain a dilemma, but properly designed trade agreements, visa regime liberalization, and security engagement can boost countries' readiness for democratic development.

Support for energy diversification can play an especially powerful role in Europe and its neighborhoods. Current patterns too often retard democracy in energy exporting countries, place economic pressure on transitional states, and mute others' human rights concerns. At the most optimistic, sustained investment in some mix of liquid and shale natural gas, nuclear power, renewable energy, and smart infrastructure could simultaneously spark economic revival, curb global warming, and expand the space for freedom.

⁷ *It's Even Worse than it Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism* (Basic Books, 2012).

⁸ Ivan Krastev, “Europe's Democracy Paradox,” *The American Interest*, March/April 2012.

Recommit to the Transatlantic Dimension

The European Union will properly play the leading outside role on behalf of democratic stability in Eastern Europe and North Africa. Geographic proximity, popular appeal, and the comparative advantages of its policy toolbox give the Union and its members the greatest interest and capacity to engage their neighbors in these regions.

However, the United States must remain actively involved in ways that complement EU efforts. This applies especially to parts of the Balkans and Middle East where the U.S. carries particular diplomatic weight. Some of this will involve ongoing bilateral U.S. relations, but there's room for additional work through NATO and its various partnerships, which should include new steps toward enlargement at the Alliance's next summit in 2014. These would be further boosted by successfully concluding talks on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (a potential "economic NATO") and incorporating a democratic political component within it. More concerted American and European approaches toward Syria, Egypt, and other parts of the Middle East and North Africa should be another priority. These measures would boost specific policies' effectiveness while reinforcing the role of values as a glue of transatlantic relations.

Support Central Europe as a Resource

Central Europeans' own recent experience, knowledge of regional languages, and lack of great power baggage have lent them particular credibility as well as a sense of calling for democratization. However, the region's internally varied pathways should be viewed as a tailorable resource rather than a paradigmatic template. Central Europeans engaged in democracy support should seek to respond to the particular circumstances and priorities of those in the relevant countries themselves. For example, new political leaders and activists in MENA have shown unexpectedly high interest in issues of transitional justice.

Others within the transatlantic community can aid these efforts by maintaining a long-term perspective and providing appropriately high-level representation and/or resources for regionally-inspired multilateral initiatives. Additional EU members could contribute to the Endowment for Democracy. The U.S. could join further proposals for cooperation in regard to MENA, which was a focus of President Obama's summit with regional leaders in Warsaw in May 2011. The initial experience of the Democracy Partnership Challenge task force concept of the Community of Democracies can offer some lessons for these types of arrangements.

Central Europeans could also contribute more to democracy's renewal inside the transatlantic community. To begin with, they could more prominently address perceived backsliding among counterparts in the region. No less importantly, they could also share ideas for strengthening civic engagement with longer-established NATO and EU members. One interesting provision in Poland allows citizens to divert one percent of their tax bill to a qualified NGO, simultaneously reinforcing civil society and sparking debate on public priorities.

Conclusion

Democracy remains a defining feature and fundamental goal for the transatlantic community. Central Europe plays a vital role in keeping it so. This short paper offers a basic overview rather than a detailed action plan, but patient, persistent efforts in the directions it suggests can help the community weather its current challenges, adapt to a dynamic international environment, and sustain opportunities for positive political change around the globe.

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