

Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe: Renewing the Promise of Democratic Transitions

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The Regional Challenge

In Europe, the post-Cold war strategic goal of the United States was crystalized by George H. W. Bush in May 1989: to build and maintain a Europe “whole and free.” At that time, the field for democracy advocates – both European and American – was wide open. The people of the newly free, former Warsaw Pact countries were hungry for assistance; those in the field felt the full support of the United States government; Moscow’s influence was declining dramatically following the collapse of the Soviet Union; and it appeared that inclusion of the new Member States in the European Union both signaled their capacity to succeed as democracies and guaranteed recourse if they once again were to exhibit weaknesses.

Two decades later, the strategic situation has changed radically, and in some ways has reversed. New fault lines have emerged in the societies of the still new democracies – very much along the lines we’ve just heard laid out by Peter, Andras and Marek in Slovakia, Hungary and Poland (not forgetting our friends in the Czech Republic, which is also facing significant anti-democratic pressures of its own as it moves toward elections, and perhaps even a bit of a coronation this October). These fault lines offer points of entry to a Russian Federation seeking to destabilize the European project. For this reason, IRI has been undertaking a fairly aggressive public-opinion research as part of our Beacon Project, in an effort to help our allies in the region better understand exactly where the main democratic deficiencies or weaknesses in the various societies are.

In late May at the Globsec conference in Bratislava, therefore, we released a comparative poll covering the four Visegrad countries through IRI’s Center for Insights in Survey Research. This poll reveals a number of disturbing trends in the heart of Europe, including waning support for core transatlantic institutions like NATO, tensions over the nature of European identity, and discontent with socioeconomic challenges.

After investing twenty years and hundreds of millions of dollars in building a ‘Europe Whole and Free,’ it is clear that there is a potential risk that transatlantic peace and security can be undermined, that Russian influence in Central Europe is increasing, and that, in some ways, challenges to democracy are now fully within the European Union’s house.

What do the data show?

First, with regard to the overarching question of security and stability, while NATO and the U.S. presence in Europe have historically been cited as a key pillar of European peace and security, in Slovakia an alarming 60 percent of respondents feel that the U.S. presence actually *increases* tensions and insecurity. A *majority* of respondents in all four countries either strongly or somewhat support neutrality towards both NATO and Russia (Slovakia: 73 percent; Czech Republic: 61 percent; Hungary: 58 percent; Poland: 53 percent). Seventy-five percent of Slovaks believe that Russia should be a security partner, followed by 59 percent of Czechs, 54 percent of Hungarians, and 35 percent of Poles.

A second area of concern is values. Our survey revealed ambivalence about the nature of European identity. More than one-third of respondents in the Czech Republic (40 percent) and Slovakia (36 percent) feel that the European Union is pushing them to abandon traditional values, while 41 percent of Slovaks believe that “Russia has taken the side of traditional values” (Czech Republic: 27 percent; Hungary: 18 percent; Poland: 14 percent).

A third area is economics. Reflecting dissatisfaction with the state of the economy and public services, a significant portion of respondents feel that their socioeconomic status is so poor that it is closer to that of Russia than Europe. Thirty-nine percent of Hungarians think that their social benefits have more in common with Russia than Europe, followed by 26 percent in Slovakia, 24 percent in Poland and 15 percent in the Czech Republic. Similarly, 37 percent of Hungarians say that their economy and standard of living is more akin to Russia’s than Europe (Slovakia: 22 percent; Poland: 19 percent; Czech Republic: 16 percent).

And on the question of Russian interference itself, in addition to the widening number of respondents who identify with Russia on key issues such as identity, the poll also indicates vulnerability to Russian disinformation among respondents who get their news from nontraditional media outlets. In Slovakia, a combined 76 percent either do not believe that Russia is engaged in efforts to mislead people (38 percent), or do not care if Russia funds these outlets (38 percent).

In summary, these results correspond closely with data from the Beacon Project's >versus< media monitoring tool, which has revealed a correlation between socio-economic disparities within the V4 countries and vulnerabilities to Russian influence. It is precisely these disparities, as well as the ongoing weaknesses in foundational institutions of democracy in the V4 that we’ve heard about here today, which we believe open a door for Russia to proffer a narrative that coldly counters the democratic one upon which the entire Helsinki vision is based.

The next key product of Beacon will be a similar public-opinion survey in Germany in the run-up to the crucial parliamentary elections there this September 24, with a special focus on opinion in the *Bundesländer* that used to comprise the German Democratic Republic, while surely German, was neither democratic nor a republic.

Thank you again for your attention to this important set of issues.