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# Brothers in Arms and Faith?

## The Emerging US-Central and Eastern Europe ‘Special Relationship’

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## Key takeaways

- During the Trump presidency, the CEE region, and particularly Hungary and Poland, have become favorite US partners: Not only has diplomatic contact radically increased, but trade and defense cooperation has notably intensified.
- While driven partly by strategic and geopolitical interests, this enhanced US-CEE cooperation revolves around shared ideological themes. 'National sovereignty', and anti-immigration, stands at the heart of these. But beneath this overall slogan, lies an overlapping understanding of 'Judeo-Christian Civilization', of 'democracy' as majoritarianism and of 'strength' as not just a means and instrument, but as a moral value and end in itself.
- At international fora like the UN and the EU, these shared ideological themes have already resulted in some very specific foreign policy alignments: From rejecting international migration regulation, to opposing liberal rights around gender.
- In the context of transatlantic security cooperation, these shared ideological themes have led to an enhanced focus on protecting 'Christian communities', an Israel-centric vision of peace in the Middle East region, and a re-phrasing of the anti-terrorism agenda, in more absolute (Christianity versus Islam) terms.
- In sum, the emerging US-CEE value alliance stands in contrast to existing NATO values and policies. If continued, it is likely to lead to more internal NATO tensions.

# Introduction

Is Central and Eastern Europe – perhaps particularly Poland – the new ‘special relationship’ in American Foreign Policy making?<sup>1</sup> And if so, how does the close yet complex relationship between Poland and Hungary, the two countries most frequently described as being internal spoilers of a politically liberal EU, fit into that equation?

When US president Trump gave his first public speech in Europe, he chose Warsaw - not London or Berlin – as the setting. Delivered on Krasinski Square, with a steel and stone memorial to the Warsaw uprising in 1944 as backdrop, the speech rang a very clear message to partners across the European continent. ‘Poland’, Trump began, is not only ‘the geographic heart of Europe, but more importantly... the soul of Europe’. I am here, he continued, ‘not only to visit an old ally, but to hold Poland up as an example for others who seek freedom and wish to summon the courage and will to defend our civilization’.<sup>2</sup>

Three years into Trump’s presidency, that initial message has proved more than mere words. Scaling down on diplomatic relations with US partners in Western Europe, most significantly Merkel’s Germany, the Trump administration has increased its trade relations, its military cooperation and its bilateral meetings with the national conservative government in Poland, as well as with neighboring Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries such as Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Moldova. Viewed from Paris, NATO may seem on its way to ‘brain death’, as president Macron put it in his much-discussed interview with *The Economist* in November 2019.<sup>3</sup> In Warsaw or Budapest however, transatlantic relations are seen as warm, even familiar. As US Vice President Mike Pence told Polish president Andrzej Duda on a visit in September 2019: ‘Tied together by commitments to freedom and faith

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1 For an excellent take on ‘special relationships’ in international politics, see Kristin Haugevik (2018), ‘Special Relationships in World Politics: Inter-state Friendship and Diplomacy after the Second World War’, Routledge. As commonly defined, Central and Eastern Europe includes Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, and the Baltic states: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. In this note we focus particularly on Hungary and Poland.

2 President Donald Trump, remarks in Warsaw, 6 July 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-people-poland/>.

3 Robin Emmott (2019), ‘Interview with Emanuel Macron’, *The Economist*, 7 November 2019.

and family (...) The United States and Poland share a special bond. We’re not just allies, we’re rodzina. We’re family’.<sup>4</sup>

In this policy note, we explore the nature, strength and tensions of this contemporary US-Central Eastern Europe relationship. We describe the expanding US-CEE ‘brotherhood in arms’: growing trade relations, intensified military cooperation, and rekindled diplomatic ties. Further, we unpack the striking and largely ignored dimensions of the US-CEE ‘brotherhood in faith’: the many ways in which the United States and Central and Eastern Europe are tied together by overlapping ideologies of national conservatism and a particular version of Christian ‘family values’.<sup>5</sup> This involves addressing the complexities of an increasingly influential and ambitious Visegrád Group, whose key players – Poland and Hungary – may be brothers, but are by no means twins.<sup>6</sup> It also means raising some broader, burning discussions about the future of NATO and the meaning of ‘Europe’. Universalist, multicultural and post-national? Or conservative, Christian and sovereigntist?

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4 Polskie Radio (2019), ‘Polish-American ties stronger than ever: US VP’, 2 September 2019.

5 In the English language, the expression ‘brothers in arms’ has a dual meaning: those who serve in conflict and war together, and ‘men who share a very close, strong relationship’. Definition from dictionary.com, <https://www.dictionary.com/e/slang/brothers-in-arms/>.

6 The Visegrád group, or the V4, consists of Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

## Brothers in Arms: Increasing US-CEE Trade and Security Relations

When President Trump received Hungary's Viktor Orbán in Washington, D.C. in the spring of 2019, he opened the White House to a leader which had been shunned as an 'authoritarian' by both the Bush and Obama administrations. On the occasion, Trump said that Orbán was a 'tough man, but a respected man', who had 'done the right thing on immigration'. Orbán, for his part, announced that Hungary is 'proud to stand with the US on fighting illegal immigration, on terrorism and protecting Christian communities all around the world'.<sup>7</sup> Orbán had allegedly been the only leader in the European Union to openly endorse Trump's presidency in 2016.<sup>8</sup>

This visit, and the narrative of a US and Central and Eastern Europe that 'stand with' or 'fight alongside' each other, was not a stand-alone event. Poland holds a particular role in this broader new focus on the region. Already in his above-mentioned 2017 Warsaw speech, Trump made the notion of the US and Poland as 'brothers in arms' a central theme. 'Polish heroes and American Patriots', Trump said, 'fought side by side in the American War of Independence and in many wars that followed. Our soldiers still serve together today in Afghanistan and Iraq, combatting the enemies of all civilization'.<sup>9</sup> And while Trump has visited Western European partners (particularly Germany) significantly less than Obama, he has increased White House invites to Central and Eastern European countries. In 2019 alone, well above ten countries from the region have been hosted by Trump in Washington. As Trump cancelled his planned visit to Copenhagen in August 2019 – and to a Danish NATO ally long considered a 'brother in arms' to the US in Iraq and Afghanistan too – the Washington Post ran an article entitled:

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7 BBC (2019), 'Trump praises 'respected' PM Orban', 13 May 2019.

8 Layla Quran (2019), 'Why Trump is meeting the Hungarian prime minister Bush and Obama shunned', PBS, 13 May 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/why-trump-is-meeting-the-hungarian-prime-minister-bush-and-obama-shunned>.

9 President Donald Trump, remarks in Warsaw, 6 July 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-people-poland/>.



‘Trump’s White House favors Bucharest and Warsaw over Paris and Berlin’.<sup>10</sup>

As of June 2018, this increased focus on Central and Eastern Europe, tipping the balance of transatlantic relations further east, has been part of official US government policy. It was announced by Wess Mitchell, the then Assistant Secretary of State for Europe, as part of the Trump administration’s ‘Europe strategy’. ‘The US is playing catch-up’, Mitchell said at a June 2018 event, ‘after years of not seeing Europe as a strategic theater’. He highlighted the importance of countering Russian and Chinese aggression on ‘Europe’s eastern frontier’.<sup>11</sup>

The increased emphasis on Central and Eastern Europe comes with a number of manifest economic, military and diplomatic expressions, not least with regard to the CEE region’s largest country, Poland. To begin with, Central and Eastern Europe’s **trade interaction** with the US has increased since Trump took office. In the case of Poland, both export from and import to the US has near doubled during this period.<sup>12</sup> The CEE’s increased trade interaction includes substantial purchases of US defense equipment, including Poland’s buy of 32 US F-35 fighter jets. In 2019, Trump also added Poland to the Visa Waiver Program, allowing Polish citizens to enter the US without a visa – an access which Polish governments have pushed for, for decades.<sup>13</sup> This decision was announced by Trump just days before the election in Poland this fall and considered a ‘gift’ to Poland’s President Duda and his ruling party Law and Justice (PiS). In addition, the Trump White House has begun discussions with Romania on the possibility of adding them to the Visa Waiver Program too – an initiative which involves both an increase in economic relations, and a need for more extensive coordination of security and intelligence measures.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, the CEE region’s **military spending** has increased substantially during the Trump administration. Not only Poland, which has long been a spender on defense, but also Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia and Romania now meet the NATO-recommended threshold on spending

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10 Anne Gearan (2019), ‘Trump’s White House Favors Bucharest and Warsaw over Paris and Berlin’, The Washington Post, 20 August 2019.

11 A. Wess Mitchell (2018), ‘The Transatlantic Bond: Preserving the West’, delivered 5 June 2018. Transcript available at [https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2018-10/HL1292\\_0.pdf](https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2018-10/HL1292_0.pdf).

12 The US-Poland trade exchange numbers are available at <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c4550.html>

13 See <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-press-secretary-regarding-nomination-poland-entry-visa-waiver-program/>.

14 See <https://www.ustravel.org/news/us-travel-encouraged-us-romania-visa-waiver-program-discussions>.

2 percent of GDP on defense. In the case of Poland, a significant part of these defense expenditures has been purchased with US producers.<sup>15</sup> While still far from the threshold, Hungary has committed itself to reaching it by 2023. Only one Western European NATO member – the UK – is currently above the threshold. This CEE commitment to the 2 percent threshold – and more generally, to a ‘hard’ military approach to security – has had significant symbolic value to Trump at NATO summits. It has also contributed to a shared US-Central and Eastern Europe narrative, in which the US and the CEE play a lead role as innovators and defenders of future NATO, while Western Europe is cast as a reluctant, even sluggish, spoiler.

Perhaps in reward of this CEE alignment with NATO recommendations, Trump has recently announced that the US will commit another 1000 troops to its **rotating military presence** in Poland. Not the construction of the permanent ‘Fort Trump’ which Poland’s president Duda originally hoped and lobbied for. But still a significant increase of the 4500 troops already there – and a symbolic gesture of cooperation, at a time when the US otherwise speaks of pulling back on its European commitments.

Finally – and perhaps most significantly – an early consensus between the Trump administration and many of the Central and Eastern European countries, would seem to be emerging around the **issue of Israel and the Middle East**. When the Trump administration announced that it was moving the American embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in December 2017, only a few countries followed suit: Most of the world critiqued the decision. Several countries in Central and Eastern Europe expressed an appreciation of the move though – with countries as Moldova, Slovakia and Romania signaling, that they too considered moving. And when the Visegrád countries decided where to place their first joint meeting outside of Europe, the choice fell on Jerusalem. Some have taken this to mean that the group both defies the official EU position on what is the proper capital of Israel, *and* is signalling foreign policy ambitions beyond the geographical limit of their own region.<sup>16</sup> As we discuss below, political, diplomatic or military

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15 Marcin Zaborowski (2019), ‘Between the Eastern Flank and Mitteleuropa: Security and defense Policies in Central Europe’, Visegrad.eu.

16 Georgi Gotev (2019), ‘Visegrad Countries to Hold First Summit Abroad in Jerusalem’, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/future-eu/news/visegrad-four-to-hold-first-summit-abroad-in-jerusalem/>. Poland, however, ended up not going to the meeting, after disagreement with Israel (and the US) over a new ‘Holocaust-law’, which the Polish government ended up amending after the reactions. See, for example, BBC (2018), ‘Poland Holocaust law: Government U-turn on jail threat’, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44627129>. The Polish government’s

support to Christian communities, including in the Middle East, may be one such shared ambition.

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relationship to its own historical past – and the Holocaust in particular - continues to be a site of tension in the relationship with both Israel and the US. For an excellent scholarly account of the Holocaust and memory politics in Eastern Europe, see Jelena Subotić (2019), *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism*, Cornell University Press.

## Geopolitics or Ideology: What's New About the US Turn to 'New Europe'?

What moves and motivates this expansion of US-Central and Eastern Europe relations? That US-CEE relations have been strengthened, has not gone unnoticed: When the Trump administration announced the increased focus on Central and Eastern Europe in 2018, director of the Center on the United States and Europe at the Brookings Institute, Thomas Wright, concluded that 'Trump is choosing Eastern Europe'.<sup>17</sup> And at the NATO summit in London this December, the attraction between Trump and the CEE was the subject of both media attention and hallway discussion. To most observers though, the current American preference for CEE-countries over allies like France or Germany, is explained largely with reference to the region's experience with transactional geopolitics and Trump's preference for 'strongmen' over 'EU bureaucrats'. Not as the product of more substantial, ideological affinities. For that same reason, the depth and durability of the emerging US-CEE 'special relationship' may be overlooked or understated.

That there are instrumental reasons for the current US-CEE attraction is indisputable. To begin with, Trump's attraction to the region reflects both the more 'willing' militarism of the CEE countries, and a US preference for partners with a willingness to use military power, and a 'flexible' approach to international institutions, long underway. This preference became visible with Donald Rumsfeld's famous 2003 distinction between 'old' and 'new' Europe.<sup>18</sup> An 'old', Franco-German Europe, whose opposition to US toppling of Saddam Hussein and war for democracy in Iraq, Rumsfeld (and his President and employer, Bush Jr) perceived as overly cautious and frustratingly 'rule-obsessed'. And a 'new', Eastern European and post-communist Europe, whose recently liberated states, quickly joined the coalition forces in Iraq, and whom Rumsfeld described as less 'rigid' in their approach to discussions about UN mandates or international law. Even President Obama, while close to

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17 Thomas Wright, 'Trump is choosing Eastern Europe', *The Atlantic*, 6 June 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/trump-is-choosing-eastern-europe/>.

18 For an overview of the Rumsfeld comment, its aftermath and broader political context, see Thomas Lansford and (eds) (2005), *Old Europe, New Europe and the US: Renegotiating Transatlantic Relations in the Post-9/11 Era*, New York: Routledge.

Merkel's Germany in sentiment and outlook, continued parts of the Bush-Rumsfeld search for European partners that would willingly pay up their economic membership of NATO, and accept the need for force (including drones) in global politics.<sup>19</sup> In other words: Part of Trump's preference for the CEE region, simply reflects that he, like several of his predecessors, is fed up with what he considers Western Europe's too hesitant or 'soft' approach to security.

In addition, a narrower and more 'Trump-specific' instrumentalism, explains his preference for East over West in Europe too. Polish-American voters were important to the electoral puzzle that brought Trump to power in the 2016 election and according to observers, Trump is actively working to secure these voters again in 2020.<sup>20</sup> Looking at the comments made by Trump during President Duda's latest visit to the White House, it is difficult not to notice Trump's awareness of - and 'wooing' to - the Polish-American parts of his electoral base. Further, Trump - throughout his campaign and presidency - has made no secret of the fact, that he hopes to see a weaker, not a stronger EU. To align the US with EU-members like Poland and Hungary, who have made it their stated goal to halt the supra-national vision of Europe from within, would in this perspective be an obvious means to that end.

Central and Eastern European countries, on their part, display a whole range of instrumental reasons to embrace American attention. Access to US trade markets. And a way to bolster the regions newfound ambitions of forging its own voice in European and global politics. After thirty years on the receiving end of EU strategies and regulations, gaining the US as friend, likely seems a 'way out' to most of Central and Eastern Europe: A way to be heard in Europe, and a way to secure a more potent and independent CEE-region.<sup>21</sup> Finally, and perhaps most obviously, CEE countries like Poland and the Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia are eager to attract US military force as a shield against what they fear is a potentially expansive and/or aggressive Russia.

And yet. If it is obvious that the once vassal states of Soviet Russia, have both instrumental reasons to seek out the friendship of Trump's

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19 On Obama's continuation of the Bush administration's quest for more 'flexible' and less rule-governed international institutions, see Vibeke Schou Tjalve (2008), 'Stadig multilateralisme, American Style?' i *Internasjonal Politikk* 2-3, pp. 287-318.

20 Dominik Stecula (2019), 'Trump is moving to secure the Polish American vote in 2020. Here's how'. *The Washington Post*, 11 October 2019.

21 For a poignant description of how Eastern Europe has experienced the post-Cold period vis-à-vis the EU, see Stephen Holmes' and Ivan Krastev's long read 'How Liberalism Became the God That Failed in Eastern Europe' in *The Guardian*, 24 October 2019.

Washington, and some hard-won experience in speaking the language of his transactional diplomacy, it is also crucial to acknowledge, that the emerging 'special relationship' between Trump's US and the CEE region, is ultimately also of an ideological nature. It is true, as observers note, that 'Hungary, the Poles, and now Romania, have basically figured out how to deal with Trump, and appeal to some of his more illiberal instincts'.<sup>22</sup> But as Trump's initial choice to call Warsaw, not London or Berlin, 'the soul of Europe' reflects, deeper values tie his national conservative government to the Central and Eastern European region.

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<sup>22</sup> Anna Gearan (2019), 'Trump's White House guest list favors Warsaw and Bucharest over Paris and Berlin', *Washington Post*, 21 August 2019.

## Brothers in Faith? A budding Ideological alliance

It makes sense therefore, to explore these values in more depth, shedding light on what may be a significant if still budding ideological alliance between the 'Trumpist' American Right and the related, albeit varied, forms of conservative, nationalist populism which has gained governmental power in CEE countries like Poland and Hungary. Such an alliance has two 'legs'. One leg is transatlantic, reflecting a decades-long, but currently intensified attempt of the American national and religious Right, to reach out to Eastern (and Southern and Russian) Europe.<sup>23</sup> The other leg is regional, reflecting a more recent, *internal* Central and Eastern European value alliance, which has 'Christian Democracy' at its heart.<sup>24</sup> As Victor Orbán phrased this internal CEE value alliance at a memorial in 2018: 'Today also, we declare that Poles and Hungarians share a common path, a common struggle and a common goal: to build, strengthen and defend the homeland and the home that Central Europe is for us; and that the resulting Central Europe should be national and Christian – the way we love it. God bless Poland, God bless Hungary!'<sup>25</sup>

These emerging ideological ties are of course loosely coupled. They thrive partly through a growing number of shared institutional frameworks – initiatives like the American-led Christian organization *World Congress of Families*<sup>26</sup> or the recent Hungarian initiative to host an

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23 For a brief overview of this outreach, see Sarah Posner (2019), 'Is Authoritarian Europe Becoming the New Hope of the Religious Right?', *Vice*, March Issue. In the Russian context, see Anton Shekhovtsov (2018), *Russia and the Western Far Right*, Routledge.

24 As noted by many observers, Orbán now prefers to speak of 'Christian democracy' instead of his earlier 'illiberal democracy'. Shaun Walker (2019), 'Orbán deploys Christianity with a Twist to Tighten Grip in Hungary', *The Guardian*, 14 July 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/14/viktor-orban-budapest-hungary-christianity-with-a-twist>.

25 Viktor Orbán's speech at the inauguration of the 'Memorial for Smolensk', 8 April 2018, <https://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/Orbán-viktor-s-speech-at-the-inauguration-of-the-memorial-for-smolensk>.

26 Christopher Stoop (2016), 'Russian Social Conservatism, The US-based World Congress of Families, and the Global Culture War in Historical Context', *The Public Eye*, winter issue.

annual *International Conference for Christian Persecution*<sup>27</sup> are cases in point.

But they also thrive through an exchange, mimicking and adaptation of national conservative or ‘Judeo-Christian’ rhetoric and argumentation. Take but the spread of attacks against George Soros, the Jewish, Hungarian-American philanthropist and hedge fund tycoon. As the founder of both the Open Society Foundation, supporting civil society initiatives in the post-Soviet sphere, and the establishment and funding of the Central European University in Hungary, Soros has become the object of attacks from both Orbán (who received a scholarship from Soros to attend Oxford in 1989)<sup>28</sup>, President Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, Soros would seem to have become a sort of personal incarnation of all that both the American and the Central Eastern European Right opposes and hopes to reverse: Secularism, cosmopolitanism and liberal principles of individual and minority rights.

What ties this loosely connected, yet potentially powerful new alliance together, is the rallying cry of ‘national sovereignty’.<sup>30</sup> To fully unpack what both a Trumpian US and a national conservative CEE (and elsewhere in Europe) *means* by ‘national sovereignty’ though, and why it hails this as a moral and not just instrumental principle, it is useful to understand the deeper ideological themes, which tie their alliance together: ‘Strength’, ‘democracy’ and ‘Judeo-Christian Civilization’.

### **Judeo-Christian Civilization**

On the theme of ‘Judeo-Christian civilization’ – and the sovereign right of nations to defend their distinct religious culture and tradition - first. Arguably, it was in Russia that the Christian-conservative national turn which now defines much of Central and Eastern (and parts of Western) Europe first became visible – and was paired so directly to foreign policy and the theme of defending ‘traditional’ values. Starting with President

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27 See <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/international-conference-on-christian-persecution-convenes-in-budapest-40857>.

28 Zsusanna Szelényi (2019), ‘1989: Viktor Orán, Fidesz and Me’, *The American Interest* Vol. XV, no 2; Péter Krekó and Zsolt Enyedi (2018), ‘Explaining Eastern Europe: Orbán’s Laboratory of Illiberalism’, *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3: 39–51.

29 Minda Holm (2018), ‘Hatet mot George Soros’, *Dagsavisen*, 20 November 2018, <https://www.dagsavisen.no/debatt/hatet-mot-george-soros-1.1235695>; see also Franklin Foer (2018), ‘Victor Orban’s War On Intellect’, *The Atlantic*, June Issue.

30 For more on sovereignty and the national right, see Minda Holm and Vibeke Schou Tjalve (2018), ‘Visions of an Illiberal World Order? The National Right in Europe, Russia and the US’, NUPI Policy note 1/2018.



Putin's third term in 2012, the Russian government has moved in a decisively more conservative direction, adapting a language of 'traditional' and, albeit often implicit, 'Christian' values. Putin has moved closer to the Orthodox Church and speaks of contemporary world politics as a 'spiritual void': a diagnosis which links terrorism, xenophobia and aggressive nationalism to apathy and the 'loss of moral reference points'. At a 2017 meeting of the Bishop's Council of the Russian Orthodox Church, Putin claimed that: 'Traditional values are ... being eroded in many countries, causing the degradation of the institution of the family, mutual alienation in society and the de-personalization of individuals (...) Indicatively, more and more people are looking at Russia as a bearer of immutable traditional values and a healthy human lifestyle'.<sup>31</sup>

This language and diagnosis is now a highly visible, general and trans-national trend: Some observers refer to a rising, Christian-conservative alliance or 'international'.<sup>32</sup> In the US, conservative Evangelical and Catholic leaders have applauded Orthodox Russia and its emphasis on Christian values and religious traditions for decades: an alliance cultivated through the above-mentioned, US initiated, but increasingly Russia-influenced *World Congress of Families*-organization.<sup>33</sup> What is new however, is that a much broader segment of the American Right, from paleoconservatives to alt-righters, now embrace the idea of a 'Judeo-Christian civilization' under threat and the strategy of a US-European Christian conservative alliance too. In his Warsaw speech, Trump repeatedly stressed that Poland is the 'soul' of Europe, because its people 'want God' and 'has faith' in traditional gender values. And in an interview, Trump's former strategist, Steve Bannon, declared that: 'We, the Judeo-Christian West really have to look at what [Putin is] talking about as far as traditionalism goes'.<sup>34</sup> That Bannon's much discussed, and largely failed, initiative to connect the far Right of the US and Europe further, tried to make an Italian monastery (not too far from the Vatican) its main seat and location, is but a case in point. Likewise, Italy's now dethroned but potentially

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31 See Minda Holm (2020, forthcoming), 'What Liberalism? Russia's Conservative Turn and the Liberal Order', in Vibeke Schou Tjalve (ed.): *Geopolitical Amnesia: The Rise of the Right and the Crisis of Liberal Memory*, McGill-Queens University Press.

32 Stroop 2016; Posner 2019; Holm 2020, forthcoming.

33 Stroop 2016. On the financial linkages, see H  l  ne Barth  lemy, 'How the World Congress of Families serves Russian Orthodox political interests', 16 May 2018, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/05/16/how-world-congress-families-serves-russian-orthodox-political-interests>.

34 Dreyfuss, Bob (2018), 'Is Steve Bannon Trump's Link to Putin and the European Far Right?', *The Nation*, 19 March.

returning Salvini has increasingly portrayed himself as the defender of a conservative Christianity – and of secularism as the root cause of contemporary Europe’s problems. And in France, Marine Le Pen - leader of the French *Rassemblement National* – states of Putin that, ‘we are defending common values [...] the Christian heritage of European civilization’.<sup>35</sup>

More than anyone though, it is now Poland and Hungary that have made themselves the voice of anti-secularism and the defense ‘Judeo-Christian’ values in Europe, adapting a narrative of the CEE region as representative of a ‘truer’, more ‘indigenous’ Europe, and contrasting this with the morally decadent and ethnically multicultural Europe of ‘the West’.<sup>36</sup> In 2017, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki thus stated that his ambition was to ‘re-Christianize the EU’. And, in another remark: ‘I would love to help the West with proper values.’<sup>37</sup> Likewise, Orbán has long made remarks that vow to ‘defend’ Christian Europe, including the need to protect Europe’s ‘Christian roots’ from a ‘watering out’ through Muslim migration and against the ‘virus of terrorism’. In that same vein, Orbán has warned against ‘creating mixed-race nations’ adding that ‘we need Hungarian children’.<sup>38</sup> There is, in other words, a direct link between the insistence on ‘national sovereignty’ and the theme of defending Judeo-Christian culture.<sup>39</sup> Only sovereign nations – free to set their own laws on issues from gender to immigration – can properly defend the religious legacy, avoiding further decay of Europe’s ‘real’ religious and cultural roots.

### **Democracy**

The coupling of Christianity and national sovereignty – i.e. the state must be strong and unitary to defend Judeo-Christian culture - is closely tied to another shared US-CEE theme: democracy. It is important to understand, that while Western Europe may consider the development in parts of the CEE-region a worrying setback for post-Cold War

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35 Vinocur, John (2014), ‘Vladimir Putin’s Woman in Paris’, Wall Street Journal, 26 May.

36 See Minda Holm (2020, forthcoming), What Liberalism? Russia’s Conservative Turn and the Liberal Order’, in Vibeke Schou Tjalve (ed.): Geopolitical Amnesia: The Rise of the Right and the Crisis of Liberal Memory, McGill-Queens University Press).

37 See <https://catholicherald.co.uk/news/2017/12/11/new-polish-pm-my-dream-is-to-re-christianise-the-eu/>.

38 Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s ‘State of the Nation’ address, February 11 2019, <https://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-state-of-the-nation-address-2019>.

39 On the exclusionary implications of an allegedly inclusive term, see Udi Greenberg (2019), ‘The Right’s ‘Judeo-Christian’ Fixation’, The New Republic, 14 November 2019, <https://newrepublic.com/article/155735/rights-judeo-christian-fixation>.

strategies of democratization<sup>40</sup>, countries like Poland and Hungary define their path as one of finally embracing 'real' democracy: an argument which echoes that of Trump, and his critique of liberalism too. In other words: While Western observers record a decrease in civil liberties - particularly affecting the areas of media freedom and civil society - and consider this a threat to democratic values and institutions, leaders in both Poland and Hungary defend their development precisely as a process of *democratization*.<sup>41</sup> Liberal freedoms, they purport, is not the friend but the enemy of democracy, as they contribute to an unhealthy pluralism and an overly bureaucratic legalism: features that halt rather than abet the clear, free will of 'the people'; the 'majority'. Liberalism, in other words, erodes unity, and turns into a perverted defense of all sorts of minority rights. *Real* democracy, on the other hand, is free to cultivate *unity - consensus*. Free from the inhibitions of international legal principles of human rights. And free from the inhibitions of an overly 'liberal' or 'individualist' domestic legal regime. This is the theme of many of Orbán's speeches. But is also very clearly part of that distinctive form of national conservatism which has brought Trump to the White House, plugging into older American discussions about the balance between liberal principles of individual and civil rights on the hand, and a more 'communitarian', democratic tradition of unity and majority rule on the other. A majority, which the national-conservative American Right defines as one of European, Christian descent – not as Muslim, not as Latin-American.<sup>42</sup>

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40 Hungary and Poland, while once considered the most successful post-Soviet democratic transitions, are now the most prominent examples of an authoritarian turn in the CEE region. In 2018, Hungary received the lowest score on the Freedom House measurement of liberal democracy of all the 28 member states. Notably, they are moving in a more anti-liberal turn mostly through legal, highly gradual means. See Se Valeriya Mechkova, Anna Lührmann, and Staffan I. Lindberg (2017) 'How Much Democratic Backsliding?', *Journal of Democracy*, 28:4, pp 162-169, and Anna Lührmann & Staffan I. Lindberg (2019) 'A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it?', *Democratization*, 26:7, pp 1095-1113.

41 For a detailed description of national conservatism as a self-proclaimed defence, not attack, on democracy, see James Poulos (2017), 'Liberalism and Democracy in the West: Which Is Under Threat?', *Foreign Affairs*, 21 July 2017. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2017-07-21/liberalism-and-democracy-west>.

42 Jean-Francois Drolet and Michael C. Williams (2019), 'America First: Paleoconservatism and the Struggle for the American Right', *Journal of Political Ideologies*.

### Strength

Finally, and directly related to this majoritarian concept of democracy, the emerging Christian-conservative US-CEE value alliance, revolves around a very particular ideal of 'strength'. 'Strength' not only as a *means*, but as *end* or *value* in itself. This concerns 'strength' in the very literal, economic and military sense. But above all, it concerns 'strength' as a trait of both personal and national character: Strength understood as national unity and stealthy, unwavering leadership. To a Trumpian US as well as to much of Andrzej Duda's (and Jaroslaw Kaczyński's, the PiS party leader) and Orbán's Central and Eastern Europe, the 'enemy' is as much the internal 'weakness' of liberal, Western culture, as it is that of external, territorial opponents. Indeed, viewed from the angle of a global, Christian conservative culture war, Russia may even be a moral *ally*. A key metaphor of this nationalist and radically conservative Christian outlook, is thus that of a contemporary American or European 'suicide' – a trope pronounced in both the American and Central and Eastern European Right wing rhetoric. Hence the recent claim from László Kiss-Rigó, an influential Hungarian bishop, that 'Europe can ignore or deny or struggle against its own identity and its Christian roots. But by doing so the society commits suicide'. Hence the numerous books by far Right European and American authors entitled variations over 'Death of the West' or 'Suicide of the West'.<sup>43</sup> And hence the theme of Trumps entire 2017 speech in Warsaw: That without the kind of stealthy leadership and character that signifies the war-experienced Central Eastern European region, Western civilization shall fade. From this stems a certain preference for male leadership. And a set of 'family values' policies, intended to return American or Central and Eastern European societies to 'traditional', more 'natural', gender roles.

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<sup>43</sup> Consider for instance, the titles of influential American author and broadcaster, Patrick Buchanan. Buchanan is a former speech writer and special advisor to presidents Nixon, Ford and Reagan, and a current endorser of President Trump. His widely read books include *Suicide of a Superpower* (2011) and *Death of the West* (2001), which address a Western liberal culture, whose secularism has killed cohesion and tradition, and whose 'weak' or 'pacifist' multiculturalism slowly waters out an Anglo-Americans or ethnic European citizenry, with immigrants of Muslim and Latin-American descent.

## A US-CEE Christian Conservative Foreign Policy Agenda?

What is the foreign policy relevance of these shared ideological beliefs? And does it make any sense to tie a Christian-conservative Central and Eastern Europe, to a Trumpian White House, which few associates with conventional Christian conservative norms or language? In other words: do ideological overlaps, and ideas of special relationships and *brotherhood*, translate into actual, shared foreign policy ambitions? At a glance, President Trump himself may not appear the usual Christian, conservative candidate. Yet much of the conservative, religious Right in the US, consider him their representative and several figures in his administration have been picked from radically conservative Christian circles: Vice President Mike Pence is a case in point. Above all though, most of the themes which Trump pursues and appear to feel strongly about, are themselves closely tied to the distinctive and radically traditionalist version of Christianity, which is now official Polish and Hungarian policy. With reference to this shared Christian 'traditionalism', Trump and the CEE countries have already met around a set of specific foreign policy ambitions. While still tentative, these emerging trends in how and where the US and the CEE find common ground in international relations, may be telling of future events. These trends include:

- **A shared approach to anti-immigration laws, including human rights norms.** In December 2018, when the UN formally ratified its *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration* pact, 152 countries voted for, while five nations voted against: the United States, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland and Israel. Among the twelve abstaining countries were Austria, Bulgaria, Italy, Latvia and Romania - Slovakia did not vote.<sup>44</sup> In other words: The shared theme of 'Muslim', and more broadly 'foreign' watering out of Christian majorities, not only means sharing rhetoric – it also means teaming up at international institutions. When the European Commission took Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic to the European Court of Justice

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44 Georgi Gotev (2018), 'Nine Eu Members Stay Away From the UN Migration Pact', Euroactiv, 20 December 2018, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/nine-eu-members-stay-away-from-un-migration-pact/>.

for refusing to comply with the EU refugee quota in 2017, these countries too seemed aligned in their defending their position (a ruling is expected next year).

- **A shared opposition to ‘minority rights’ and ‘gender ideology’ at the UN and EU.** This shared opposition to ‘liberal’ and ‘secular’ migration policies, also relates to other aspects of the Christian conservative identity agenda: an opposition to minority rights, including gay, lesbian and transgender rights, or what both Trump and the CEE countries cast as ‘gender ideology’.<sup>45</sup> Their Christian conservatism, organized around the concept of ‘family values’, is coupled with a vision of gender, where women’s rights – to abortion, to accessible contraception – is potentially under pressure. This means targeting ideas and practices challenging heteronormativity – not least at international institutions like the EU and the UN. In Hungary in 2018, the government decided to ban a gender studies program at the national universities: according to Orbán, the program was ‘ideology, not science’. A spokesman for the Prime Minister elaborated that ‘the government’s standpoint is that people are born either male or female, and we do not consider it acceptable for us to talk about socially constructed genders rather than biological sexes’.<sup>46</sup>
- **A shared will to ‘spoil’ all but the common market parts of the EU?** As members of the EU, Hungary and Poland continually stress their opposition to a ‘cosmopolitan’ or ‘post-national’ EU, that imposes secular and universalist values upon Christian and national conservative member states. In this role as the ‘outcasts’ of the EU, they seem to have found a shared bond: unified by their social ostracization and opposition to EU ‘totalitarianism’ and ‘bureaucracy’. In this vein, a 2018 publication from *The European Council on Foreign Relations* (ECFR) described Poland and Hungary as ‘brothers in arms’ in their quest to reform the EU.<sup>47</sup> And in a 2018 opinion poll conducted by the ECFR among

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45 See for example Liz Fekete (2016), ‘Hungary: power, punishment and the ‘Christian-national idea’.

46 Maya Oppenheim (2018), ‘Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban bans gender studies programmes’, 24 October 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/hungary-bans-gender-studies-programmes-viktor-orban-central-european-university-budapest-a8599796.html>.

47 Josef Janning (2018), ‘Brothers in arms: Poland and Hungary seek to transform the EU’, European Council On Foreign Relations, 25 October 2018,

the (then) 28 EU member countries, EU policy experts and policymakers expressed the most disappointment with Hungary, the UK and Poland. According to the poll, both Warsaw and Budapest were disappointed in France, and took an ambivalent stance on their relationship to Germany.<sup>48</sup> Their shared opposition to the EU as a cultural and not just economic and instrumental cooperation, is one which aligns with the perspective of Trump and American national conservatives, who despise the idea of a post-national, 'French-German' EU.

- **A shared ambition to return the UN to its 'sovereignist' roots?** As stressed by Wess Mitchell in the abovementioned speech on 'Winning the Competition for Influence in Central and Eastern Europe': 'The West must reclaim the tradition of supporting the nation state as its own and work harder to ensure that international institutions reflect the democratic will of nations, or expect institutions to lose influence and relevance'. 'As President Trump has said, America will honor the right of every nation to pursue its own customs, beliefs, and traditions. For too long many in the West have touted international institutions without acknowledging that they derive their authority and legitimacy from the nation state. It is in the nation that democratic accountability resides.'<sup>49</sup> In and of itself, this position need not be radical, as it builds on the 1945 UN Treaty.<sup>50</sup> But it does symbolize an emerging alternative international consensus around *turning away* from the post-1989 conception of liberal order, where liberal democracy – how states govern themselves – was explicitly a matter of international concern.<sup>51</sup>

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[https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_brothers\\_in\\_arms\\_poland\\_and\\_hungary\\_seek\\_to\\_transform\\_the\\_eu](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_brothers_in_arms_poland_and_hungary_seek_to_transform_the_eu).

48 Ibid.

49 'Winning the Competition for Influence in Central and Eastern Europe: US Assistant Secretary of State A. Wess Mitchell', 18 October 2018,

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/commentary/transcript/winning-the-competition-for-influence-in-central-and-eastern-europe-us-assistant-secretary-of-state-a-wess-mitchell/>.

50 See Minda Holm and Ole Jacob Sending (2018), 'States before relations: On misrecognition and the bifurcated regime of sovereignty', in *Review of International Studies*, 44:5, 829-847, and Minda Holm and Vibeke Schou Tjalve (2018), 'Visions of an Illiberal World Order? The National Right in Europe, Russia and the US', NUPI Policy note 1/2018.

51 Holm and Sending (2018).

- **A communitarian turn to defense of Christians abroad?** In November 2019, Hungary hosted the second International Conference on Christian persecution. The US participated and endorsed the Hungarian initiative. To the emerging Trump-CEE alliance, and also Russia, the protection of Christians in Europe, the Middle East and Africa is a central and highly prioritized theme. Since 2019, the USAID and Hungary's 'Hungary Helps' initiative, a program aimed at protecting Christians in the Middle East and Africa, are together rebuilding Iraq's largest Christian city, Qaraqosh.<sup>52</sup> Modelled on the Hungarian initiative, and following domestic pressure on USAID for more explicit support to Christian minorities, USAID established a new 'Genocide Recovery and Persecution Response initiative' in 2018, largely focused on Christians.<sup>53</sup> During a meeting between Orbán and Vladimir Putin in November 2019, both leaders stressed the need to protect persecuted Christians in the Middle East. Furthermore, in a Pew Polling from 2015-2016, a large majority in Orthodox-majority countries (all except Ukraine) think that Russia has a 'moral obligation to protect Orthodox Christians outside its borders'.<sup>54</sup> The rhetoric on protecting Christians abroad is also strong in Hungary and Poland. In 2018, Poland vetoed an EU human rights statement, with the Polish Justice Minister stating that it was because the other delegates did not accept the Polish proposal to also include protection of Christians and Jews: 'We proposed that recognising the need to protect Christians and Jews against religious discrimination be put on an equal footing with protecting the rights of people with a different sexual orientation, migrant children, or women'.<sup>55</sup> More broadly, the emphasis on protecting Christian communities elsewhere is connected to a communitarian idea of protecting your kin – be it diaspora, or Christian communities – abroad,

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<sup>52</sup> See <https://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/news/iraq-s-largest-christian-city-to-be-rebuilt-as-part-of-hungarian-us-cooperation>.

<sup>53</sup> Michael Igoe, 'To direct more funding to Christians, USAID looks to Hungary', *Devex*, 25 November 2019, <https://www.devex.com/news/to-direct-more-funding-to-christians-usaid-looks-to-hungary-96055>.

<sup>54</sup> Pew Research Center (2017), 'Religious belief and national belonging in Central and Eastern Europe', <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/#conservative-views-on-sexuality-and-gender>.

<sup>55</sup> See <https://euobserver.com/justice/143100>.



developing as a potential alternative to cosmopolitan principles such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P).<sup>56</sup>

- **An Israel-centric vision for the Middle East?** Unlike the 'Old Right' of the early twentieth century, both the Trumpian, the Russian and the CEE national conservatism of today includes Judaism in the cultural heritage which it considers itself a protector of – an inclusion expressed in the term 'Judeo-Christian Civilization' as such. This involves not only an absolute preference for the interests of Israel in the Middle East region (symbolized, for instance, by the US move of its embassy to Jerusalem and the support of this). It also involves a joint commitment to the support and if necessary, the military defense, of Christian (and, less prominently, Jewish) minorities across the globe.<sup>57</sup> Complicating this unity however, is a growing anti-Semitism in the CEE region, as well as tension surrounding the historical memory of the region in relation to WWII in particular. This is perhaps most visible in the US' closest regional partner, Poland. A recent survey by the Anti-Defamation League showed that anti-Semitism was on the rise in Central and Eastern Europe, with 48% of the respondents in Poland presenting a negative view of Jews.<sup>58</sup> Relations between Poland and Israel (as well as Poland and the US) are also complicated by recent Polish attempts at controlling the narrative of Poland's role in World War II and the Holocaust.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Minda Holm (2019), 'The Politics of Diasporas and the Duty of Care: Legitimizing interventions through the protection of kin', in Nina Græger & Halvard Leira (eds.): *The Duty of Care in International Relations: Protecting citizens beyond the border*, Routledge.

<sup>57</sup> For more on the turn towards communitarian principles of protection as an alternative to cosmopolitan principles such as R2P, see Minda Holm (2019), 'The Politics of Diasporas and the Duty of Care: Legitimizing interventions through the protection of kin', in Nina Græger & Halvard Leira (eds.): *The Duty of Care in International Relations: Protecting citizens beyond the border*, Routledge.

<sup>58</sup> For a summary, see <https://www.timesofisrael.com/adl-survey-25-of-europeans-anti-semitic-east-european-bigotry-rises-sharply/>.

<sup>59</sup> See for example <https://www.dw.com/en/polands-duda-to-forego-holocaust-memorial-event-in-israel/a-51921581>.

## Conclusion: Brothers, not Twins

In this policy note, we have argued that the US under Trump's leadership would seem to have gained a new 'special' friend: Central Eastern Europe. While exploring the full extent of what a full-fledged US-CEE alliance might imply for Europe, NATO and international relations at large, goes beyond what is possible here, it seems obvious that the ramifications are potentially dramatic. Already, Western European countries like France and Germany seem to drift (or be driven) from the center of gravity in NATO. Europe is no longer synonymous with 'the EU' – as one could get the impression of at some point. The centrality of both Poland and its fellow 'New Europe' neighbors on the other hand, grows greater by the day.

Is this recalibration of transatlantic partnerships likely to last? Or does the current US-CEE affection mark an aberration in US foreign policy - one most likely to vanish on the day that Trump leaves office? There is no doubt, that the election of Trump has been crucial to the current US-CEE affection. Should he be re-elected in November 2020, that affection is likely to continue or grow. Should he be replaced by a democratic President, it is equally likely to be pulled somewhat back.

And yet some deeper fluctuations, whose hold on both Europe and the US go beyond the role of single individual leaders, are arguably at stake. What we have described in this policy note are trends and ideas that have gained support not only in conservative circles across the US and the CEE in recent decades – but in parts of Western political opinion and debates as well. These trends and ideas have relevance not only for the future course, tasks and values of NATO – but also for NATO's view of, and relationship with, Russia.

This is not to say that all arrows point in the same direction. What seems emerging is a muddy picture, with national variations on some shared ideological themes – a picture further complicated by a range of contrasting and competing geopolitical histories and interests. The CEE region, and the very different histories which its countries have had vis-à-vis Russia, itself contributes to this complexity. Hungary and Poland

may speak of themselves as 'brothers'. But twins, they are not.<sup>60</sup> To begin with, Hungary is far more pragmatic in who it wants to deal with, be it the US, Russia, China or Turkey. To retain that flexibility, Hungary buys most of its defense material from the European market: the Czech Republic, Germany, France and Turkey. Poland, on the other hand, is driven by one single, over-riding fear: Becoming the next Ukraine – falling, once more, into the clutches of Russia. For that reason, Poland has bet all of its defense money on the US market, and pursues a US-loyal strategy so total, that some call it 'risky'.<sup>61</sup> Hungary, in other words, remains 'multi-vectored' in its approach strategic partnerships, while Poland is one-sidedly US-partnered. Ultimately, this creates a complex relationship – and two different approaches to what not just a transatlantic, but a Polish-Hungarian 'brotherhood' means and implies.

Exactly what course the emerging US-CEE value alliance unpacked in this policy note sets for the future of Europe, NATO, and the world, is thus impossible to predict. Our overall ambition here, has been to direct attention to the fact, that something more than cold admiration for strategic geopolitics unites the figures of Trump, Duda/Kaczyński and Orbán. The contemporary 'crisis' within NATO and transatlantic security, we have hoped to show, is not simply one between (Western European) values on the one hand and (Central and Eastern plus US) cynical geopolitics on the other. It is not simply that the US and Poland and Hungary would like to turn NATO into a strategic community and not a value alliance – more profoundly, they hope *to redefine the values of NATO*. Their 'Western civilization' is a communitarian, not a cosmopolitan or globalist one. It is a Christian (or Judeo-Christian) one – not a universalist, human rights-centered one. And it is a 'family values', traditionalist one – not a 'feminist' one.

In his prompt rebuke to President Macron's description of contemporary NATO as 'brain dead' this fall, NATO's Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, said that 'any attempt to distance Europe from North-America will not only weaken the transatlantic alliance' but risk 'dividing Europe itself'.<sup>62</sup> The question is though, if that division has not already taken place. What to make of a Europe, where the UK – long a

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60 For good and up-to-date overview on the divide within Central Europe in relation to security and defence, see Marcin Zaborowski (2019), 'Between the Eastern Flank and Mitteleuropa', 9 October, <https://visegradinsight.eu/between-the-eastern-flank-and-mittleuropa/>.

61 Paul Taylor (2018), 'Poland's risky 'American First' Strategy', Politico, 10 April.

62 'NATO at 70 - The bedrock of European and transatlantic security', 7 November 2019, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_170606.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_170606.htm).

stabilizing, integrating bridge between Western Europe and the US – opts for Brexit and a future ‘solo’ course, while ambitious leaders of ‘New Europe’ declare ‘the turn of the anti-communist generation, which has Christian convictions and commitment to the nation’? Predictions may be impossible. What seems clear though, is that understanding not just numbers and arms, but also ideas and slogans, will be crucial in the years to come.





## Norwegian Institute of International Affairs

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