

What would the possible change in the US leadership mean for the Central European countries?

Amid the ongoing pandemic that has impeded the world in a significant way, the Central European countries are eagerly focusing their attention to their most important ally across the Atlantic. As the US elections are nearing, the region in the heart of Europe is raising the question of: what changes will the US elections bring? Since Donald Trump's win in 2016 and his "America first" campaign, the US has been gradually shifting away from its allies, and the relations to its European partners have been notably strained. The president's numerous attacks on multilateral institutions such as NATO have tested the long-standing ties with the European countries.¹ Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has also damaged America's image within the European countries, according to a recent survey of the European Council on Foreign Relations. The United States' insufficient response to the pandemic has brought doubt upon the capability of America to be a global leader.² In numbers, 68 percent of French, 65 percent of Germans and 38 percent of Poles have decreased in trust towards the US, according to the poll.³ In the last four years, Trump's presidency remained indifferent to the political developments and has effortlessly watched the democratic standards in Central Europe decline. It can be said that Hungary is hardly a functioning democracy anymore and Poland will reach the same situation soon, if nothing changes. The current approach of the US has solely focused on business interests and security instead of values. This can be clearly seen when comparing Obama's and Trump's approach in certain situations. For example, the administration of Barack Obama steadily and openly criticized the fading democratic path in Hungary and Poland. However, with the arrival of Donald Trump, all pressure on the Central European governments to maintain democracy was gone.⁴ For instance, during the Polish President's visit to the White House in 2019, President

Trump was questioned regarding his stance on the violation of the rule of law in Poland. Whereas Trump's response was: "there is no problem with democracy in Poland" and that he is "not concerned, at all".⁵ Given the aforementioned, the Central European region (CEE) gained the belief that as long as American business interests are satisfied, the White House will not meddle with the deterioration of democratic values in these countries.⁶ Trump's administration has been long trying to revive the unity of the countries of the former Habsburg empire and simultaneously aiming to weaken Germany, as well as strengthening the central European states' distrust towards Russia. The reason for weakening Germany is that a German-led Europe would probably mean a pro-Russian Europe, and that is not something the US would be comfortable with. After the UK leaving the "block", Trump's focus moved towards forging stronger ties between Austria and the Visegrad countries, headed by Poland, one of the most faithful allies of the US.⁷ In America's view, Vienna could serve as the capital of Central Europe and replace Berlin's current role.⁸

The US' push against Chinese influence and Russian disinformation campaigns in the CEE

The CEE region is experiencing growing Chinese and Russian influence. Beijing has been paving its way into Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), since its ongoing expansion with investments and economic incentives through its "seventeen-plus-one-engagement" strategy since 2012 under the Belt and Road Initiative (OBOR). When it comes to Russia, this country has been building on its widespread disinformation campaigns, trying to anchor its sphere of influence in the region.⁹ The US is fully aware of these efforts, which are trying to weaken its position within the region. The urgency was also reflected in the recent visit of the US Secretary of State

Mike Pompeo during his five-day tour to central Europe (Czech Republic, Slovenia, Austria, Poland). The aim of his busy agenda, was mainly to counter Chinese and Russian influence in Central Europe.¹⁰ Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Poland has been fearing Russia's assertive posture¹¹ and therefore welcomed the promise made by Washington to add 1,000 troops to the 4,500 US soldiers that are already on the ground in Poland. Moreover, Mike Pompeo and Polish Defense Minister Mariusz Błaszczak signed a deal, called the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), in August 2020 which made Poland an even more critical component of the US military presence in Europe.¹²

During his Europe visit, Pompeo also warned against China's role in the 5G network construction, or Huawei to be exact, that is being seen as a threat by Washington.¹³ The US have been pressuring the CEE countries to take a tougher stance on Huawei and its involvement in their 5G network expansion.¹⁴ The United States fear China's influence in the CEE, as they assume that smaller countries like those of the Visegrad, will not be able to oppose to a greater power. This is, however, not true, as the Czech Republic proved recently with its blunt reaction towards China's critique of the Czech Senate speaker Milos Vystrcil regarding his official trip to Taiwan. Another example is Poland's arrest on spying allegations of a Chinese employee at Huawei and a former member of the Polish intelligence service in Warsaw. Notwithstanding China's increased interest in the Central European countries, even after years of Chinese presence, the reality is that Chinese investments turned out to be a disappointment for the region. Even if the Sino investment trends in the CEE would continue at the current rate, the region would need more than 100 years to be as economically interconnected with China as Western Europe is nowadays.¹⁵

What are the possible US election scenario outcomes for the region?

As already mentioned, the deterioration of democracy and the rule of law in some of the Central European countries is alarming and the COVID-19 pandemic only aggravated this trend. Additionally, with the China-US strategic competition and Russia's efforts to destabilize the region, the CEE countries face a dilemma on how to position themselves.¹⁶ Therefore, it is more crucial than ever for the United States to engage decisively on this front in the region and achieve improvements in the upcoming term.¹⁷ There is growing optimism within European diplomatic circles that the damage in the CEE could be undone following Biden's victory.¹⁸ For the governments of Poland and Hungary, the backers of Trump's populist revolution, who openly oppose the idea of an EU strategic autonomy, a Biden administration would mean a defeat. Trump's electoral loss could persuade his populist backers in Central Europe to endorse the Franco-German axis.¹⁹ Germany and France would get the chance to fulfill their dream of a sovereign Europe. Budapest and Warsaw, on the other hand, would be forced to comply with the rules and principles of Brussels and would be pressured to restore their democracies.²⁰ When it comes to the issue of China, Biden said he would adopt a conciliatory approach towards China. "Rather than having a unilateralist America alone policy with a Biden leadership, one would have a 'let's work with our allies to find solutions' approach."²¹ However, if the opposite is true, and Trump secures his second leadership term in November, the populist forces in Hungary and Poland would enjoy victory, posing a threat to liberal democracies in Europe.²² In this case, Trump would probably continue to weaken Germany and praise the CEE countries. Under this scenario, the US would strengthen the relationship between Hungary, Poland, and Austria and thus also reinforce the authoritarian regimes in Budapest and Warsaw.²³ Budapest was very outspoken when asked about the US elections outcome. In a recent article of Magyar Nemzet, a conservative newspaper, Orban declared: "We are rooting for

another victory for Donald Trump because we are very familiar with the foreign policy of US Democratic administrations, built as it is on moral imperialism. We have tasted it — albeit under duress. We didn't like it and we don't want a second helping."²⁴ Orban sees Trump as an ally that could support him in the battle against liberals.²⁵ Other state leaders are not that open about the matter. The Polish president Andrzej Duda was asked the same question, but he preferred not to answer.²⁶ However, it is most likely that a Biden win would shatter Poland's hopes of receiving more troops.²⁷

The Three Seas Initiative could serve as a co-operation platform for the US and the CEE

The US-China strategic rivalry will probably be the dominant principle defining the global politics of the upcoming decades, regardless of who will win the next presidential US elections.²⁸ However, the US and Europe share democracy, both are committed to political pluralism, individual rights, media freedom, and checks and balances. It is therefore clear that in the US and Europe, elections matter. In China, on the other hand, not that much. China is built on a different political regime and values. The economic development of China has not resulted in an evolution towards democracy and is lacking respect for individual rights.²⁹

To effectively counter Chinese influence within the region, the United States ought to collaborate more closely with Central Europe. By working together, the United States and Europe could come out as winners of the great-power competition.³⁰ One way of collaboration could happen through the platform called the Three Seas Initiative (3SI); the United States should leverage the 3SI to build a consensus with Central and Eastern Europe. The 3SI is a regional cooperation platform aimed at facilitating interconnectivity and boosting economic development between EU member states in the Adriatic Sea, Baltic Sea, and Black Sea region. Moreover, the recent novelty of the Three Seas Initiative, the 3SI Investment Fund, a commercial fund designed to invest in critical infrastructure projects, serves as a way for the United

States to promote open, competitive economic markets and policies. In this regard, the United States announced a major commitment to "reinforce energy security and economic growth in Central Europe recently."³¹ The announcement was made by Pompeo prior to the annual Munich Security Conference. Secretary Pompeo announced \$1 billion for the Three Seas Initiative as a demonstration of America's continued commitment to Europe. The latter reflects America's awareness of the strategic significance of Central Europe as well as, Washington's notable trust in the economic power and prospects of the Three Seas region.³²

Concluding remarks

Despite the outcome of the US elections, one thing should be clear for both actors, China and the US, mutual cooperation is crucial. No matter which administration will succeed in the next term, the US needs to dispose of a broad and flexible package of political, financial, and trade offers in regard to the CEE. Providing military capacities to the region will not be enough to outweigh China's offers under the Belt and Road Initiative.³³ The administration's interests in co-operation with Central European states ought to be maintained but also enriched by values, as these two factors are interconnected. The US has unprecedented influence within the Central European countries and should use this to promote the rule of law and democracy. The majority of Central Europeans are holding gratitude towards the US for helping them end communism and are therefore looking up to Washington. Against this background, the United States are able to have an impact on democratic standards in Central Europe more efficiently than any other external power. The US is equipped with instruments of both, soft and hard power. The sale of US defense equipment to Central European states, for instance, could be conditioned upon meeting essential standards of democracy by the respective governments. It is pivotal that future US administrations stop turning a blind eye on the deteriorating standards of democracy in Central Europe.³⁴

As disintegrating Europe would in the end, not turn out to be in Americas interest, because the US needs a strong Europe to be able to counterbalance China's interests.³⁵ Last but not least, it should be clear to both Europe and the US that working together with China and being on good terms with this global power, even if difficult, is inevitable due to the numerous global issues in which each of these players have a crucial role. China needs to be part of global solutions to worldwide problems like for example halting the COVID-19 pandemic or mitigating climate change.³⁶

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Endnotes

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