United States in Central & Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans

How should the new US administration revive its allure in the region?
The outcomes and findings of this report are based on public opinion poll surveys carried out in September and October 2020 on a representative sample of the population in nine countries: Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia. The surveys were conducted on a sample of 1000 respondents using stratified multistage random sampling in the form of computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. In all countries, the profiles of the respondents were representative of the country according to gender, age, education, place of residence and size of settlement. For the purposes of graphical data visualisation, the results were rounded to full numbers. To improve the readers' experience, the responses in closed questions with a scale were generalised. For example, a question with options definitely agree / rather agree / rather disagree / definitely disagree was merged to agree / disagree.
Introduction & recommendations

The public image of the United States has suffered considerable setbacks throughout the world following a poorly managed COVID-19 crisis response and four years of an inward-looking, distrustful and unpredictable president. While this reputation loss compounds the challenge faced by the new administration, it also opens up space for President Biden to define the United States on the international scene de novo. Just as President Obama’s “Yes we can” moment in 2008 sparked a wave of hope across the democratic world, so too can Biden’s “America is back.”

Against this backdrop, this paper turns its focus to the approach the US should now pursue towards the Central and Eastern Europe and Western Balkan regions. Based on opinion polls conducted in October 2020 — at the tail end of the Trump presidency — it provides an overview of societal perceptions towards the US in the two regions and suggests a path forward.

The countries surveyed can be put into four groups according to their overall affinities towards the US:

- **Stable proponents**
  - Poland
  - Romania

- **Middle-ground partners**
  - Czechia
  - North Macedonia
  - Hungary

- **Sceptics**
  - Slovakia
  - Bulgaria
  - Montenegro

- **Averse**
  - Serbia
  - Montenegro

Each country in the region, however, is distinct and their attitudes towards the US motivated by different factors. This leaves no single and straightforward approach that the US should take in a rapprochement. The recommendations put forward here, consequently, reflect the overall survey findings, with country-specific information pinpointed when relevant.

According to the data collected, the US should:

1. **Invest in communication towards the region and individual countries through partners and trusted voices**  
   - [p.06](#)

2. **Use NATO, within which the US is respected as a partner, as a multilateral cooperation platform**  
   - [p.08](#)

3. **Invest more in relationship-building and broaden cooperation to areas beyond security**  
   - [p.11](#)

4. **Revive close cooperation with the EU**  
   - [p.14](#)

5. **Make use of the positive appeal of the new administration**  
   - [p.16](#)
Invest in communication towards the region and individual countries through partners and trusted voices

The survey data, elaborated on the next page, indicate that a lack of strong US engagement in the region, whether in a form of publicly expressed interest or communication strategies, might have had negative repercussions. Only in Poland and Romania, two countries that have long maintained pro-US attitudes, do an overwhelming majority of respondents identify the US as a strategic partner. In five of nine surveyed countries, in fact, more people perceive Russia as a strategic partner for their country than the US. In Hungary, meanwhile, twice as many people perceive China to be a strategic partner than the US. And in Czechia, the US holds only a slight edge over Russia and China.

The extensive influence efforts directed by Russia and China towards the region, undoubtedly, are also contributing to these patterns. These operations come in the form of, for example, economic support and infrastructure investments (primarily China in the Balkans) and political relationship-building, media influence and cultural diplomacy (both countries).

An augmented US presence, therefore, is necessary in the region to counterbalance these moves including in media and civil society support and cultural diplomacy.

How does it compare to Europe?

From the Western Balkan countries, 18% Serbians, 31% of Macedonians and 54% of Montenegrins would choose the EU. Germany was chosen as a strategic partner by 57% of the respondents in EU member states.

* Respondents were asked to choose max. 2 countries / groups of countries from the following list: US, Germany, Russia, China, France, EU (only for the Balkan countries).

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**Which country do you consider to be a strategic partner for your country?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>Russia</th>
<th>China</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czechia</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montenegro</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Macedonia</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serbia</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

United States in CEE & the Western Balkans

Poland

69% 6% 7%

Romania

50% 6% 10%

Czechia

29% 21% 23%

Montenegro

29% 15% 38%

North Macedonia

28% 6% 23%

Bulgaria

18% 13% 41%

Slovakia

17% 14% 42%

Hungary

16% 2% 33%

Serbia

59% 59% 8%
Use NATO, within which the US is respected as a partner, as a multilateral cooperation platform

While a strong partnership with the US is not the favoured choice for many in their bilateral relations, the opposite is true when it comes to multilateral cooperation within the NATO framework. In all long-term NATO member states (themselves excluding the Balkan countries), a majority agree that the US is an ally and partner within the Alliance. This robust finding, in fact, even holds true in Bulgaria, a country that has traditionally shown higher levels of support for Russia and correspondingly less affinity towards the US and NATO.

As members of the organisation for at least 15 years, these countries are accustomed to multilateral cooperation and now hold relatively stable expectations of what is to come out of it. They may also attach greater trust in certain institutional designs where their voices can be heard and gain backing from other partners in the region.

A lack of experience in and exposure to the organisation could, meanwhile, be one reason that some members place lessened prioritisation on the US role within the Alliance.

Montenegro and Bulgaria maintain fraglia memberships in NATO. This is particularly heightened in the case of the latter, which has recorded consistent declines in public support for NATO membership since GLOBSEC began polling this question in 2018.

62% of respondents consider the US to be the ally or partner for their country.

In Serbia, the question was asked without a NATO reference, only a degree of agreement with the statement “US is our ally” was measured.
Education as a factor influencing support for NATO

Education ranked as a factor positively influencing support for NATO membership in nearly all countries. Individuals with university degrees are generally more inclined to judge both NATO and the US as an ally favourably than those with less formal education. It could prove prudent, therefore, to invest additional resources in NATO strategic communications tailored to mainstream television channels, tabloids and other outlets consumed by those with lower levels of educational attainment. On this point, Serbia is the only exception, with more educated respondents indicating a greater preponderance of anti-US and anti-NATO views.

Invest more in relationship-building, broaden cooperation to areas beyond security

Many in the region associate the US with military power, even aggressivity. This group is largely comprised of those sceptical of NATO, but even among those who consider the US to be an ally, a surprisingly large number of respondents deem the US to be a threat to their country or an aggressor that uses NATO to control others. The much-maligned invasion of Iraq in 2003 (where many Central European governments risked their reputations by backing the initiative against the wishes of their Western European counterparts) and its aftermath and the NATO bombardment of Yugoslavia in 1999 both still resonate, especially in the Balkan region. US engagement in the world is, consequently, primarily still seen through a military lens.

This legacy has witnessed societies, apart from Romania and North Macedonia, shy away from expressing openness to greater US involvement in the region. Increased efforts and bilateral cooperation in non-military issue areas closer to people’s hearts, such as technology, education and climate6 could thus contribute to a gradual shift away from the perceptions of “military” or “aggressive” US.

Lack of trust in the US may, however, be also linked to the previous administration’s unpredictable and inconsistent approach towards Europe. This is evidenced by the fact that distrustful attitudes towards the US have worsened throughout the continent, not only CEE and the Balkans.7

57% of Romanians and 44% of Macedonians believe the US should play a more prominent role in their region.

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6 https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/TT20_Final.pdf
### Countries where the perception of the US as a threat is high:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>US is a threat (2019 polling)</th>
<th>US is a threat</th>
<th>US is not a threat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Montenegro</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serbia</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czechia</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Macedonia</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### The US is perceived as a threat because of...

- **In Montenegro**
  - Its desire to be first and rule the world
  - Aggressive behaviour
  - Aggressive to control Montenegro through NATO and/or the EU
  - Unjustified bombing in 1999

- **In Slovakia**
  - Expansionist activities, desire to rule the world
  - Destabilisation efforts and provoking of conflicts
  - Aggression against other countries and attempts to influence the internal affairs of other countries

- **In Serbia**
  - Unjustified bombing in 1999
  - Its desire to rule the world and dictate what others should do
  - A history of only bad experiences with the US
  - Its preferable treatment to Albanians over Serbians and willingness to "take" Kosovo from Serbia

#### Threat perception is also linked to levels of education in all countries surveyed.

Those with university education are less likely to perceive the US as a threat. On average, there is a 19 percentage point difference between respondents with university education and respondents with lower education in the US threat perception.

### Countries where the perception of the US as a threat is low:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>US is a threat (2019 polling)</th>
<th>US is a threat</th>
<th>US is not a threat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Czechia</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Macedonia</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### The US is not perceived as a threat because of...

- **In Czechia**
  - Czechia being too small for the US to care
  - General sentiment that the country is not under threat by anyone
  - Constructive relations within NATO
  - Shared democratic values

- **In Hungary**
  - Hungary being too small for the US to care
  - Constructive relations and economic ties
  - Geographical distance

- **In Poland**
  - NATO alliance and partnership
  - Poland being too small for the US to care
  - Perceptions that the countries share good or fair relations

- **Bulgarians and Romanians difficult to categorise.**

  While only around 15% of Bulgarians and Romanians perceive the US as a threat, at the same time, 48% of Bulgarians and 43% of Romanians did not know how to respond to the threat question, which puts them into a separate category in this regard.
Revive close cooperation with the EU

The EU can also serve as a vehicle for facilitating non-military cooperation. As evidenced through their perceptions of NATO, Central and Eastern European countries are accustomed to multilateral cooperation. The attitudes of these countries towards the EU, furthermore, are more favourable than those towards NATO. Any re-engagement with the EU could, consequently, also translate into a rapprochement with the region where countries often view the EU as a means to increase their voice and relevance.

The Balkans, similarly, view the EU in a more positive light than the US, with a majority of respondents believing that EU membership would mean a “better future” for the next generation.

More focused cooperation on issues that societies may consider integral to prospects for a “better future” could both boost the US image in the two regions and bolster relationships with the EU. These issues include:

- Stronger business ties and trade.
- Common anti-corruption stance and position towards the protection of the rule of law.
- A common stance towards multilateral institutions like the WHO and WTO.
- Shared policies on key foreign policy areas important to the region, particularly China and Russia.
- Consensus on combating information manipulation and regulation of tech giants.

On average, 75% of respondents in EU member states support EU membership and 72% believe membership means better life prospects for future generations.
In Slovakia and Czechia, according to the survey, an overwhelming majority of respondents expressed their preference for Joe Biden rather than Donald Trump to win in the 2020 US Elections when asked in October. The new administration should constructively use the positive image of Joe Biden in the two countries.

58% in Slovakia and 57% in Czechia wanted Joe Biden to win the election.

Who are the biggest fans of Biden?

- **Czechia**: 87% Biden, 21% Trump, 22% Don’t know
- **Slovakia**: 58% Biden, 16% Trump, 26% Don’t know
- **Poland**: 34% Biden, 40% Trump, 26% Don’t know
- **Hungary**: 40% Biden, 37% Trump, 23% Don’t know
- **Romania**: 33% Biden, 30% Trump, 37% Don’t know
- **Bulgaria**: 26% Biden, 18% Trump, 56% Don’t know
- **Serbia**: 16% Biden, 59% Trump, 25% Don’t know
- **Montenegro**: 41% Biden, 47% Trump, 12% Don’t know
- **N. Macedonia**: 22% Biden, 43% Trump, 36% Don’t know

The new administration should constructively use the positive image of Joe Biden in the two countries.
Country-by-country: What changes the view of the US?

**Bulgaria**

- **Education**
  Pro-US attitudes rise with the level of attained education. For example, while 51% of respondents with lower education believe the US is Bulgaria’s ally and partner, 58% of university-educated believe the same.

- **Age**
  Large part of young people aged 18-24 did not know how to respond to questions asked in the survey. 30% could not pick any strategic partner for Bulgaria and 57% could not say whether the US is a threat for Bulgaria or not.

**Czechia**

- **Education**
  Education plays a strong role as well. Those with university education are by 26% more likely to be pro-US and pro-NATO than those with elementary education.

- **Gender**
  Women have a slightly higher tendency to respond “don’t know”.

**Hungary**

- **Age**
  The respondents aged between 18-34 years are more pro-US and pro-NATO than older Hungarians.

- **Education**
  Pro-US and pro-NATO attitudes rise with education in Hungary too. While 34% of respondents with lower education (elementary & secondary without final exam) see NATO as aggressive and a tool for the US to control others, only 22% university-educated think the same.

- **Urban-rural divide**
  Those from rural areas tend to be less pro-US or pro-NATO.

**Montenegro**

- **Age**
  Pro-US attitudes decline with age. 56% of those aged 18-44 believe the US is an ally and traditional partner of Montenegro, compared to 43% of those aged 55+

- **Education**
  Education plays a role in questions on threat perception and seeing the US as an ally. 54% of those with elementary education and secondary education without final exam see the US as a threat compared to 37% of those with university education.

- **Gender**
  Women are less inclined to leave NATO (47%) than men (54%).

**North Macedonia**

- **Age**
  Macedonian older generation of 65+ is less supportive of NATO but 61% believe the US is their ally and partner within NATO.

- **Urban-rural divide**
  Those from rural areas are more supportive of both NATO and the US. 33% from rural areas would choose the US as a strategic partner compared to 25% of respondents from the cities.

**Poland**

- **Education**
  Those with higher education are more supportive of NATO and have a lower feeling of being threatened by the US. 76% of respondents with elementary education would vote to stay in NATO compared to 95% of university-educated.
Serbia

Age

Serbia is the only country where the category of 65+ is the most pro-US and pro-NATO, rather than younger generations. 33% of those aged 65+ perceive the US as a threat compared to 60% of respondents aged 18-24.

Education

Support for the US and NATO also rises with education. For example, 69% of university-educated believe the US is Serbia’s ally and partner, compared to 53% of respondents with elementary education.

Slovakia

Age

Pro-US attitudes gradually decline with age. 27% of those aged 18-24 years would choose the US as a strategic partner for Slovakia, compared to 11% of those aged 55+.

Education

Support for the US and NATO also rises with education. For example, 69% of university-educated believe the US is Slovakia’s ally and partner, compared to 53% of respondents with elementary education.

Romania

Age

The youngest surveyed generation (18-24 years old) is the most supportive of the US and NATO, the remaining generations have mixed feelings depending on a question.

Education

University educated are more pro-US and pro-NATO, but many respondents with elementary education did not know how to respond to questions. 60% of university-educated, for example, consider the US to be Romania’s partner and ally, compared to 34% of those with elementary education. 19% from the latter group, however, did not know how to respond.
Credits

Collection of opinion polls in each country was coordinated by FOCUS, s.r.o.

Terminology used to identify regions in the report:

• CEE / Central and Eastern Europe – Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia
• Western Balkans – North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia

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