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Brief comments on the international politics of Central Europe

I am in full agreement with Roland Freudenstein's presentation of Central Europe's security condition. Both the information he conveys and his analyses are on the mark. I can only highlight a few points, calling attention to dominant trends and developments.

The first point to stress is that while the Visegrad 4 (V4) once had a common, positive purpose, it no longer has a constructive objective. When it came into being, V4 was but an impressive lobby seeking to join the West, specifically NATO and the European community. By the time all members of the V4 achieved their objective, i.e., having joined both NATO and the European Union, there remained some consultation and some cooperation – but the four countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) had less and less in common both in their domestic politics and international orientation.

Hungary and Poland have come to embrace real or imagined traditions that resemble values typical of the 19th rather than the 21st century. Most important among these values are these two countries' authoritarian tradition, combined now with lip service to democratic formulae. Elections are held,

parliament's function, the internet press – and even to a lesser extent the printed press -- enjoy some freedom, but real power is concentrated in the executive branch and actually in the hands of Viktor Orban in Hungary and Jaroslaw Kaczynski in Poland. In addition, both governments condemn and oppose secular trends in contemporary Europe, uphold so-called family values, and fight against gay rights – even as Budapest and even Warsaw have emerged as centers of porn production and prostitution and gambling. Even by American standards, the dominant political class in Hungary and Poland is deeply hypocritical as they speak of their fine democracies and the values they practice. It should be stressed, however, that they do enjoy considerable if not always majority support, if not in the major cities, then in the countryside.

The situation is quite different in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. There, too, corruption reigns supreme, but the democratic tradition of Czechoslovakia seems to have survived most authoritarian challenges. Slovakia, having adopted the euro, is committed to the success of the European experiment. The Czech Republic tolerates a (small) Communist Party in its legislature. As both countries generally look West, their leading politicians look down especially on Hungary's populist acrobatics. Most recently, the Czech Republic, apparently with German support, has even sued Poland for environmental damage caused by Polish mines.

If the V4 is not or not yet fiction, their member-states' collaboration is vastly exaggerated, particularly by Mr. Orbán. His purpose is to create the impression at home that he and his ideas are more popular abroad than they actually are. His visits to Washington and London are meant to reinforce that impression. Whatever fame he has in Europe – as in Italy and France, for example – stems from far-right parties and politicians seeking rather than holding power at the present time.

The second point to make here is that exacerbating friction within and among the Central European V4 is the rapidly growing competition in the region by four outside powers: the European Union; the United States, in harmony with NATO; Russia; and China. When V4 came into being three decades ago, the region's outside world was made up of Europe and the US. China was far, far away, at the early stage of its eventually spectacular economic development. Russia was not only losing its external empire in East-Central Europe; it was in the process of losing its internal empire in the Soviet Union itself. At that time, there was general appreciation for the role played by the United States that contributed to the collapse of communism and opened the door for the former satellites to regain their independence.

This is no longer the case, of course. China, which seldom demands expressions of political loyalty from its new partners, offers economic benefits that Hungary, the Czechs Republic and Slovakia especially welcome. Russia has returned to the region, except to Poland where anti-Russian sentiments remain as strong as ever; this is the only reason why Poland's military contributions to NATO are as widespread and genuine as they are. Elsewhere, Hungary -- despite still vivid memories of the 1956 anti-Soviet revolution -- is supportive of Russian goals in Ukraine and of Moscow's efforts to weaken the European Union. Widely reported is the presence, seemingly well-tolerated by the Hungarian government, of Russian intelligence in Budapest. By contrast, the Czech Republic, after new revelations this year that Russian agents destroyed a Czech ammunition depot in Vrbetice in 2014, expelled dozens of Russian diplomats -- and the Russians retaliated by expelling Czech diplomats. Worse yet, Moscow has more recently published a short list of countries it considers "unfriendly"; this enemies' list of just two states contains (of course) the United States -- and the Czech Republic. Adding to the complications, and to the confusion, Czech president Milos Zeman remains as pro-Russian as was his predecessor Vaclav Klaus.

All in all, Central Europe -- given domestic tensions, important differences among the V4, and acute competition in the region by international actors -- has

been plunged into a whirlpool of misplaced expectations, economic underperformance, widespread corruption, unreconcilable differences between populations in the cities and in the countryside, and thus an uncertain future.

Long gone is appreciation to the United States, including Radio Free Europe, for its effort to keep hope alive in the satellite countries. Gone is appreciation for the extraordinarily generous support the European Union is still extending to its new members in Central Europe; in Hungary, though certainly not elsewhere, even the Union's flag was ordered to be removed in 2014 (!) from the country's parliament by Laszlo Kover, Mr. Orban's closest friend and longtime head of the Hungarian legislature.

Away from politics and security issues: Seldom mentioned is the promising pro-Western trend in the region's cultural orientation. Throughout Central Europe, including Hungary, there is tremendous interest at least in the cities in West European books, American movies and sports. People follow games and teams of the National Basketball Association. Even the government-controlled press in Poland and Hungary prints extensive stories, and indeed gossips, about Western film stars' reported love affairs. There is absolutely no comparable interest in Russian or Chinese culture.

The European Union, notably Germany, also has a huge economic presence in Central Europe. But, for reasons far too complicated to describe here, this economic presence has not been translated into political influence. Neither the EU nor NATO have felt the urgency to do more than verbally protest the region's authoritarian impulse in recent years. The United States, under the Biden administration, will give the issue more attention, perhaps even a priority, but it is unclear what instruments of policy – what means of policy -- it can find to implement its goal of a truly democratic, stable, and secure Central Europe. In theory, the European Union could also make a difference and so could NATO in Poland. But the future of Central Europe -- unlike the momentous changes that international circumstances prompted in 1989-91 – will be decided this time by Central Europeans themselves who value modernity, integration, and Western values.

