

**The Value of Central Europe on Donald Trump's Map:
Cooperation and Divergence on Regional Issues (1)**

Közép-Európa helye Donald Trump térképén:
együttműködés és különbségek a regionális kérdésekben (1.)

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Abstract: Under the Trump administration relations between the US and Central European countries has significantly improved, while disagreements between the EU in general and Washington have widened. Some of the most significant strategic challenges which Europeans and the US both have to tackle and have emerged on the transatlantic agenda in recent years are regional issues, such as the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the question of NATO and EU enlargement, and in the Middle East the Iranian nuclear deal and the Israeli Palestinian conflict. While the policies of the V4 countries in these regional issues often support US position, the real positive impact of this support on US strategic objectives is sometimes very limited due to a number of factors.

Összefoglaló: A Trump-kormányzat hivatalba lépése óta jelentősen javultak az Egyesült Államok és a közép- európai országok kapcsolatai, miközben az EU és Washington között erősödtek a viták. Az európai országok és az USA stratégiai kihívásai között Az utóbbi években a transzatlanti kapcsolatok narendjén előtérbe kerültek olyan regionális ügyek, mint az orosz-ukrán konfliktus, a NATO és az EU bővítésének kérdése, a közel-keleti térségben az iráni nukleáris kérdés és az izraeli palesztin konfliktus, amelyek az európaiak és az Egyesült Államok számára egyaránt jelentős kihívást képeznek. Noha az említett regionális kérdésekben képviselt visegrádi álláspontok gyakran támogatják az amerikai külpolitikát, ezek valódi hatása az amerikai stratégiai célokra különböző tényezőknél fogva gyakran meglehetősen korlátozott.

INTRODUCTION

In our series on US – Central European relations, we conduct a detailed examination of the US–V4 relations from the perspective of some important US foreign policy objectives and how the V4 countries relate to them. Donald Trump’s presidency is widely perceived to have put significant strain on the transatlantic relationship. From trade disputes through NATO burden sharing to the handling of the “Iranian problem”, tension has significantly increased between the Atlantic allies since Donald Trump took office. In this context, a thorough examination of the relationship reveals that there are significant differences between European countries concerning the transatlantic relationship and how they relate to the Trump administration’s foreign policy. One of the most visible dividing lines among the European allies is the one between Western members and Central Europe, namely the Visegrad Group (V4). On the surface, Central European governments have not been very critical of Washington; on the contrary, strengthening military cooperation, shared views on pressing energy security challenges, and a similar view on migration and national sovereignty appear to dominate the relationship.

The main purpose of our two-part analysis is to conduct an examination of the US–V4 relations from the perspective of certain important US foreign policy objectives. In other words, the analysis seeks to clarify whether the notion that the V4 serves as America’s buttress in Europe, especially vis-a-vis the EU core, is valid. The analysis also identifies and evaluates the commonalities and differences between the V4 concerning their approach to the Trump-administration. The behaviour of the V4 is analysed in three broader regional issues which have been high on the transatlantic agenda in recent years. The three regional issues discussed in this paper are:

- the Ukrainian-Russian conflict;
- the future enlargement of the EU and NATO;
- the Iranian nuclear deal and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

The two-part paper will first outline a brief summary of the Trump administration’s foreign policy objectives and decisions on these three issues, followed by a brief summary of the responses of the EU and the core Western European powers to the policies in question. The paper will then provide an overview of the related V4 policies and responses, examining Poland and Czechia in the first part, Hungary and Slovakia in the second part. Within this context, the key factors in formulating the policy positions, and the role the relationship with the US played in the process will also be examined. The paper will also seek to predict whether the respective V4 policies are likely to change. In examining the similarities and differences among the V4 countries, the second part of the paper will also seek to evaluate the region’s importance in relation to US foreign policy objectives.

US POLICY ON REGIONAL ISSUES AND THE EUROPEAN RESPONSES

POLICIES ON THE UKRAINIAN– RUSSIAN CONFLICT AND EU AND NATO ENLARGEMENT

Since President Trump took office, the US policy towards Russia has been a [gradual increase of pressure](#). This has included increased US military presence in Eastern Europe within NATO and bilateral arrangements, and additional resources for US military activities in the region and defence assistance to allies. Furthermore, the administration, working with Congress, has [expanded the sanctions](#) against Russia and its leadership in connection with Russia’s various assertive activities on the international stage – from the war in Eastern Ukraine to interference in US politics – as well as repressive domestic policies. US support for Ukraine has also strengthened. In addition, Washington has put pressure on its European allies to uphold the EU sanctions against Russia, and it has supported



Ukraine's position opposing Nord Stream 2. Alongside continued economic and capacity building assistance, diplomatic support in terms of the non-recognition of the annexation of Crimea and general support for the Ukrainian objectives in the war in Eastern Ukraine, the Trump administration has provided the Ukrainian military with lethal weapons (Javelin missiles), changing previous US policy. It has also stood by [NATO's open door](#) policy with regard to Ukraine, initiating closer cooperation between NATO and Ukraine at different levels, and also urging the EU to increase its assistance to Kiev and keep the prospect of EU membership open.

The US [support for NATO and EU enlargement](#) concerning Georgia has also remained in place. However, despite strong military ties to Tbilisi, Georgia and its NATO membership is not a top priority for the US administration, which has not taken meaningful steps to accelerate the process. President Trump does not want to exacerbate the tensions with Moscow and likely would want to avoid another dispute with his Western European allies, who are opposed to further NATO enlargement in the East.

The picture with regard to the Western Balkans (WB) is more complex. The Trump administration was instrumental in concluding the accession of Montenegro, which was invited in 2015 and gained full membership in June 2017, despite President Trump's outspoken [reservations](#) concerning the decision. A similar US position could be observed about North Macedonia, as the administration supported the conclusion of the [Prespa agreement](#) between Greece and North Macedonia, the final roadblock to Skopje's membership.

Although the expansion of NATO and the EU into the entire WB is a declared US policy objective in the long-run, taking realities into account, the question is how Washington views the question of EU expansion in the case of Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Bosnia Hercegovina. According to [official US policy](#), Washington is in favour of enlargement; however, according to some observers, with certain policies the US administration is undermining the prospects of the resolution of political conflicts, especially in the case of Kosovo, particularly its biased pro-Albania and anti-Serbian policies in the region.

With Germany's leadership, European powers have imposed and maintained [EU sanctions](#) against Russia in response to the annexation of Crimea, despite increasing opposition from some Member States. Germany and France, as initiators of the Normandy format, have been active in seeking to resolve the Russian–Ukrainian conflict, and they have been supported by the US. The EU has also provided Ukraine with significant economic and non-lethal military assistance since 2014. However, most EU members have largely opposed sending lethal weapons to Ukraine. The Western European countries also oppose the NATO and EU membership of Ukraine and Georgia in the foreseeable future, to large extent because they fear it would further deteriorate their relationship with Russia, especially if the Alliance expands further East. France and Germany were considered to be the main obstacles during the recent decade of further enlarging the EU in the WB; however, a change of policy might be occurring especially in Berlin recently, although France and others continue to slow down the process. However, they have not put any major barriers in front of a NATO enlargement.

POLICIES ON MIDDLE-EAST CONFLICTS

With respect to the Middle East, the Trump administration's policies are characterized by strongly pro-Israel and equally strong anti-Iranian positions. In the case of Israel, some of the [major decisions](#) which reflect this strong US support include the decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem in May 2018, an end to all US humanitarian aid and other assistance to Palestinians, a proclamation which recognized the Golan Heights as part of Israel in March 2019, a peace proposal underwritten by Jared Kushner, President Trump's son-in-law and senior advisor on the Middle East. This is perceived to strongly reflect Israeli interests and the administration's indifference to the controversial Israeli statements on the future of the West Bank.

Since May 2018, when the Trump administration decided to withdraw from the JCPOA, US policy on Iran has been termed "[maximum pressure](#)" on the Iranian economy and regime. The US, among others, [re-imposed all secondary sanctions](#) by November 2018, designated the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization, ceased all exemptions to countries on US sanctions that pledged to reduce the trade of Iranian oil, and increased diplomatic pressure on the country by seeking to build an international coalition against Tehran.

Concerning the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, most [EU Member States](#) have taken a much more critical view of Israel's policies and emphasize their disagreement with many of the decisions taken by the Trump administration on the issue. Most EU members, including France and Germany, opposed the relocation of the US embassy, the decision on the status of the Golan Heights, and the withdrawal of US funds for Palestinian organizations. Furthermore, the European and US positions continued to frequently collide at the UN. The Trump administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA and its "maximum pressure" policy was also met with strong opposition from the Western European capitals. The Europeans seem to want to save the Iranian nuclear deal and have been highly critical especially of the unilateral secondary sanctions imposed by the US.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE V4 COUNTRIES: POLAND

Since Poland entered NATO in 1999, Washington has considered Warsaw its most valuable ally among the V4 countries, not just with respect to its sheer size but also its commitment towards a strong [US-Polish relationship](#). Since the beginning of Donald Trump's presidency, the Polish government has put an even stronger emphasis on its transatlantic relations than during previous years. This pursuit of a strong alliance with the US has also meant taking a position against their European partners.



THE UKRAINIAN–RUSSIAN CONFLICT

The main [geopolitical concern](#) of the Polish government, led by the Law and Justice party, is potential Russian aggression. Since 2014, Poland has been one of the main supporters of a tough approach to Russia, within both the EU and the NATO frameworks. Therefore, Warsaw [sees increased US presence](#) and closer military cooperation as the only feasible security guarantee for Poland and the entire region. From Warsaw's perspective, the increasing US military presence in Poland is [also seen as a reaction](#) to Russia's intervention in Ukraine and a tool to deter further Russian aggression in the entire region.

Despite [the recent debate](#) on World War II memory politics, which have deteriorated high-level Polish–Ukrainian relations, Poland remains one of the most important supporters of Ukraine. During the Maidan protests and the following conflict in Eastern Ukraine, Poland supported Ukraine in [various forms](#). Polish activities mainly [concerned](#) counselling on good governance, programs for local entrepreneurship, military assistance, and humanitarian aid – in total about PLN 18 million (about EUR 4 million) just in 2017.

Regarding military assistance, Poland was amongst Ukraine's top [providers, especially of military training](#). Most importantly, the Polish have provided military equipment and military instructors. Beside these, a joint multinational Polish–Lithuanian–Ukrainian brigade was [established](#), which reached operational readiness in 2016. However, since Poland is not part of the Normandy format, it could not play a leading role in the international diplomatic efforts aimed at resolving the conflict.

In the last five years Warsaw has consistently expressed vocal support for the extension of EU sanctions against Russia. With regard to energy security, similarly to the US position, Poland is one of the most vocal critics of the German-led Nord Stream 2 pipeline. Poland's main concern is that the new pipeline would not only increase the region's energy dependency on Russian gas, but it would also threaten Ukraine's energy security.

EU AND NATO ENLARGEMENT

As the only V4 member of the Berlin Process, Poland is a crucial [promoter](#) of EU enlargement in the WB. In 2019 Poland held the presidency of the Western Balkans Summit. During the summit, President Andrzej Duda [expressed](#) criticism of the delay of the accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia. Most recently, before the European Council meeting on 15 October, Foreign Minister Jacek Czaputowicz co-authored an op-ed with fellow V4 foreign ministers [supporting](#) enlargement, while in a joint letter with the V4 prime ministers Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki also tried to [convince](#) other European leaders to begin the process.

Warsaw is also a vocal supporter of NATO enlargement. Poland consistently advocates the continuation and expansion of open-door policy with regard to both the WB and Eastern Europe, including Ukraine's NATO accession. In this context, in February 2019, following the Bucharest Nine Summit, Poland [expressed](#) its support for further NATO enlargement. In March 2019, in a speech delivered to the Sejm, Foreign Minister Jacek Czaputowicz [emphasized](#) the importance of deepening cooperation with Georgia as a NATO partner country.

THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT AND IRAN

Although Poland has never played an active diplomatic role in the Middle East, it has sought a balanced relationship with key powers in the region, including Israel, the leading Arab countries, as well as Iran. However, Poland's Middle East policy has been increasingly influenced by its relationship with Washington. This was manifested most remarkably when the Polish government, at Washington's initiative, hosted a Middle East [conference](#) in Warsaw in February 2019. Poland hosted the event mainly as a favour to the US government and was expecting closer security cooperation in exchange.

Although Poland follows the official EU position on supporting the Iranian nuclear deal, the main purpose of the conference was to demonstrate international support for Washington's tough approach to Iran. In this context, the diplomatic value of the conference was questionable for Poland. Poland's move has triggered harsh criticism from its Western European allies for hosting the conference and for pushing the US agenda.

Concerning the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, all V4 countries, including Poland, continue to support the two-state solution. Warsaw's recent policy favouring Israel is similar to Washington's approach, although with some noticeable differences. With regard to the US declaration of accepting Jerusalem as the Israeli capital, Poland abstained from voting on the resolution at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) condemning the move and was similarly supportive of Israel at the EU level. However, Poland's behaviour is more nuanced on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. So far, no high-ranking Polish official has [voiced any plans](#) for moving the Polish embassy to Jerusalem. During the 2017-2018 period, Poland only voted once in line with the US position in the UNGA on the Israel-related resolutions, 14 times the opposite way, and it abstained 7 times. Furthermore, in line with the EU objectives, Poland continues to support the two-state solution.

Poland's approach towards Israel is also influenced by historical memory and domestic politics, and Polish–Israeli relations have gravely deteriorated recently in this area. The debate between Israel and Poland began in the summer of 2018, when the Polish parliament made a bill on national remembrance, planning to criminalize the implication of Polish co-responsibility for the Holocaust. The so-called Holocaust law triggered extensive criticism from the US and Israel. Poland soon [amended](#) the bill, and the issue seemed to be settled.



The historical debate sparked up again during the Warsaw summit, when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared that Poles were responsible in the Holocaust. The diplomatic conflict has become so grave that Poland cancelled its visit to the Visegrad summit held in Israel. Hence, Warsaw's approach to Israel conforms with the US policy only to a certain degree.

CONCLUSION

Since the beginning of the Trump presidency, Poland has tightened its cooperation with Washington. The close bond between the two current governments is especially visible in some crucial geopolitical matters of Eastern Europe, including the Russian–Ukrainian conflict and EU/NATO enlargement. Assessing the US and Polish policies, one could make the assessment that Poland supports an even harder stance against Russia and is urging EU/NATO enlargement even more vocally than the US, while in the case of the other V4, the differences with Washington stem from a more balanced and careful approach towards these issues. Concerning the Middle East, while Warsaw at times goes to great lengths to please Washington, it is also willing to pursue a different path, as demonstrated by its relations to Iran and the JCPOA.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE V4 COUNTRIES: CZECHIA

Although Prague is considered to be a reliable ally of the US, there are considerable areas where one can find diverging policies. Prague is very clear about the [issues of disagreement with the Trump administration](#), from climate change and trade to support for multilateral organizations. While the Czech government, led by Andrej Babiš, seeks to strengthen Czech–US alliance through many of its policies, President Miloš Zeman has at times articulated [pro-Russian and pro-Chinese views](#). In 2016, President Zeman even [proposed that the country should hold a referendum](#) on leaving both the EU and NATO shortly after the Brexit referendum, though the government rejected his call. In September 2019, he also told reporters that he wanted Czechia to [withdraw recognition of Kosovo as an independent state](#) during his visit to Serbia. In spite of the mainly symbolic power of the Czech President, Zeman's autonomous behaviour and his geopolitical stance, as well as the [emerging Eurosceptic and anti-NATO forces](#), which clearly contradict the American interests in the region, somewhat undermine the Babiš government's foreign policy goals.

THE UKRAINIAN–RUSSIAN CONFLICT

The Czech government's relations with the Trump administration are fairly strong. Prime Minister Babiš has declared that it is interested in a strong US presence in Europe and [a strong transatlantic alliance](#) to balance against the Russian and Chinese geopolitical ambitions. This policy was demonstrated by a meeting between the two countries' [foreign ministers in Washington](#) in February 2019. Mike Pompeo thanked minister Tomáš Petříček for the Czech military assistance in Iraq and Afghanistan and for being a protecting power for the US in Syria. He also welcomed Prague's measures against Huawei, which the US considers a major cyber threat. One month later, Prime Minister Babiš met President Trump on his first official visit to the White House. [In their joint statement](#), they underlined their shared understanding of the importance of cyber security and telecommunication, as well as the two-percent goal on defence spending, energy security, and mutual trade. The statement also highlighted the importance of the continuation of sanctions against Russia and support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The statement is all the more significant as former Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka criticized the economic sanctions against Russia, and President Zeman even called for their withdrawal. The current Czech government supports the EU sanction policy against Russia. Since taking office, Foreign Minister Petříček has repeatedly condemned Russian aggression both in Georgia and Ukraine and made it clear that Prague will not recognize the annexation of Crimea and that they see the Minsk Agreements as vital to achieving peace in the Donbass region. In January 2019, Petříček consulted with his Ukrainian counterpart about the continuation of Czech [humanitarian and development assistance](#) for Ukraine and the energy security issues resulting from the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, which the Czech government officially [opposed in 2016](#).

EU AND NATO ENLARGEMENT

Czechia endorses a [“gradual” EU enlargement process in the WB](#), and the government officially [agrees with the former European Commission's evaluation](#) of the countries seeking membership, as well as most of its recommendations. The country reaffirmed its stance twice in 2019, by [a joint statement of the V4 Group](#) in May and as a member of a [pro-enlargement coalition of 13 EU members](#) in June.

Prague also confirmed its support for further NATO enlargement in [a joint statement of the Bucharest Nine platform](#) in February 2019. Although Prime Minister Babiš is more cautious about particular endorsements than his predecessor [Sobotka, who advocated Georgian accession to NATO, Czech diplomacy is still supportive](#) of a NATO partnership with Ukraine and Georgia. Although there have been no official Czech calls for the accession of these countries,



the [Georgian government has reported](#) Foreign Minister Petříček stating that Georgia was ready to join the military alliance, and [Ukraine's ambassador to Czechia](#) has emphasized that Prague was a key supporter of his country's NATO and EU ambitions.

THE ISRAELI–PALESTINIAN CONFLICT AND IRAN

Czechia has [historically](#) had close ties to Israel and is still considered one of Israel's [closest supporters](#) in the EU and at the UN. It is the [only European country](#) which voted against Palestine's observer status in the UN in 2012. However, instead of fully backing Israel, Prague balances between a critical approach towards Israel that reflects the dominant EU opinion and a more supportive attitude following Czech diplomatic traditions. Regarding Israel, Prague still stands for the two-state solution, and Prague voted with the US on Israel-related issues in the UNGA only twice out of 22 times, while in 2018 it was absent from the vote six times. On the other hand, in May 2018 Czechia, together with Romania and Hungary, vetoed an EU resolution which would have condemned the US for moving its embassy to Jerusalem and deviated from EU language on the issue in support of the Trump administration's decision. President Zeman even said that he would support the move of Czechia's embassy to Jerusalem, although the Babiš-led government has not taken any decisions in this direction. Prague has also been very supportive of deepening ties with Israel in the V4 format.

Concerning Iran, Czechia is more in line with the EU mainstream policy than with the US approach. It supports keeping the [JCPOA alive](#) and has sought to build bilateral economic cooperation recently. In May 2019, Deputy Minister of Economy and Trade Eduard Muřický even visited Iran to [strengthen economic ties](#). However, the Czech government has [raised concerns](#) about Iran's ballistic missile program also in relation to the threat those weapons pose to Israel. Hence, while the Czech policy is closer to the US policy on a declaratory level, these considerations are not significant enough to break EU consensus on the core issue – the JCPOA – at stake.

CONCLUSION

While American–Czech relations have improved since the inauguration of Donald Trump, it is far from the strategic relationship Warsaw has built with Washington. Prague demonstrates a willingness to be a part of a Central European pro-US coalition, bolstered by Czech support for US policies on Ukraine, EU/NATO enlargement, and Israel. However, the divisions within Czech domestic politics have a significant influence on these foreign policy questions; therefore, Prague seems to be less of a reliable long-term advocate of US foreign policy goals in comparison to Poland.