

The Central European *Open Letter* to Obama: an enduring Bush legacy?

While Obama's foreign policy is generally associated with hope in many countries after the widely rejected one of his predecessor, several high-profile intellectuals and former political leaders of Central Europe have come to share their 'growing sense of nervousness' in an *Open Letter*. Such a warning in countries which are seen as very close to the USA when it comes to foreign policy may attract attention.

Does it mean that the former administration, largely influenced by the neocons' agenda, was preferable to Obama's orientation in Central European eyes? In fact, the letter was not drafted directly by the current leaders; it nevertheless indicates a climate, which sharply contrasts with Western Europe's initial optimism about Obama.

The Open Letter to Obama

The Open Letter¹ published by the Polish newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* on July 16th 2009 may sound paradoxical: while Obama has been generally praised in Western Europe, he has received a cold welcome from Central European leaders. In this context, the Open Letter deserves a close look.

First, the list of the 22 signatories is composed by intellectuals and policy makers, all claiming their attachment to the transatlantic link and the need to deepen it². Interestingly enough, many of them are only *former* political leaders. Apart from the Lithuanian President Valdas Adamkus (born in 1926), the other statesmen are not anymore heads of States: Lech Walesa and Aleksander Kwasniewski for Poland, Vaclav Havel for the Czech Republic, Emil Constantinescu for Romania and Vaira Vike – Freiberga for Latvia are all former Presidents. As a consequence, the Letter cannot claim to represent the current view of the Central European leaders in office, although the political profile of the signatories is rather high. The Open Letter itself mentions a possible generational change with direct policy implication, given that the new leaders may feel less indebted to the USA than its authors were. Another

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interesting point lies in the fact that the Letter is not a condemnation of any Obama's action. As the Bulgarian analyst Ivan Krastev commented afterward: *"This is not about something done by the Obama administration. [...] It's much more a kind of a signal that we wanted to send now, when we believe that European policy of the Obama administration is in the making"*³. Although all the authors signed for their own reasons, they represent collectively the mindset of a significant part of the ruling elite.

Second, as regards the content, the Letter gives an indication of the current fears and political expectations of the signatories. The message puts it frankly: *"All is not well either in our region or in the transatlantic relationship. Central and Eastern Europe is at a political crossroads and today there is a growing sense of nervousness in the region"*. This "growing sense of nervousness" deals in fact two main issues: the transatlantic relations and the Russian question.

The transatlantic relations lie at the core of Central European strategic culture⁴, aiming at improving relations between the two sides of the Atlantic, with a particular emphasis on NATO. Even before Obama dropped in its envisaged form (on September, 17th 2009) the project of US missile defense complex, the signatories have made this issue *"a symbol of America's credibility and commitment to the region"* (at least, according to the Letter, in some countries, although it was largely unpopular among the concerned populations⁵). This project was a project of the Bush presidency, loudly supported among others by John McCain and the neocons pundits. The Letter's authors regret that *"Despite the efforts and significant contribution of the new members, NATO today seems weaker than when we joined"*.

The "Russian question" is the other important issue seen from Central and Eastern Europe. Although the authors do not claim to be anti-Russian, and aim at being 'constructive', Moscow clearly worries the drafters. It is described as *"a revisionist power pursuing a 19th-Century agenda with 21st-century tactics and methods"*. It is then accused of trying to expand its sphere of influence in its neighbourhood, in security, social and economic domains. Moreover, *"it uses overt and covert means of economic warfare, ranging from energy blockades and politically motivated investments to bribery and media manipulation in order to advance its interests and to challenge the transatlantic orientation of Central and Eastern Europe"*. This can hardly be considered as the description of a friendly power, or at least of a power with which you can deal. Yet, the 'reset doctrine' launched by Obama was precisely about engaging Russia according to the US priorities – such as cooperation on non-

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proliferation issues, Afghanistan and Iran⁶. The fear of a ‘trade-off’ between the USA and Russia appears clearly in the Letter, when the drafters “*want to ensure that too narrow an understanding of Western interests does not lead to the wrong concessions to Russia*”. In other words, as the former Czech foreign minister Alexander Vondra (one of the signatories) commented later, “*there is the fear among Central and Eastern Europeans that our interest in keeping the trans-Atlantic bond could be somehow sold out to the relationship with Russia*”⁷.

A symbol of pro-Bush nostalgia or a strategic critique of Obama?

The kind of “preventive critics” of the Obama administration in the Open Letter has raised many eyebrows, in the USA as well as in Western Europe. Are the critiques against Obama of an ideological nature – i.e. neoconservatism? Foremost, if neoconservatism can be framed as a particular set of American nationalism – in fact, ‘a pseudo-imperial nationalism’⁸ – how can it be exported in non-American land? The neoconservative influence should be understood, both through an analysis of networks, and ideas while the appropriateness of neoconservative ideas in the Central European context should be assessed.

In terms of networking, Bruce P. Jackson has definitely⁹ played a major role in the promotion of the American neocons’ influence in Central Europe. As the leader of the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq, he was able to gain considerable support for the Bush administration’s Iraq policy among Central European leaders – he helped draft a declaration for the Vilnius 10, a group of countries on the verge of entering into NATO¹⁰. His activities have helped to promote neoconservative ideas in Europe, and the ones of their allies in the Bush administration. In fact, “*perhaps Jackson’s most significant role has been that of an emissary, from the United States to Eastern Europe, the defense industry to the defense department*”¹¹. Yet, whatever importance he may have, a single man cannot pretend to promote ideas alone: this process involves a whole set of organizations, think-tanks, program, media and activists trying to reach political influence.

The diffusion of a particular set of ideas cannot be summarized to a one-sided approach, from active American neocons to passive Central Europeans. The ideology exported is important, but it will gain more success if it can find an appropriate ground; ideas, beliefs and values are understood and reinterpreted more or less selectively in particular social cognitive frames.

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Because it is assertive on Russia (a potential rival) and eager to rely on Eastern European partners who embody the tales of “struggle for freedom”¹² (and anti-totalitarian mobilization), neoconservative foreign policy objectives, and more broadly the ones chosen by the Bush administration¹³, proved attractive for some Central European ruling elites and compatible with their agenda, addressing two of their major concerns. In fact, some segments of the post-communist societies share the same narrative of the end of the Cold War: according to this vision, Reagan’s foreign policy is given nearly all the credit, with both interventionist and pro-democracy credits. The often-mentioned Atlanticism of Central European leaders is a byproduct of such beliefs: an assertive American power as ‘a force for good’ has helped to develop a social resistance against the former regime.

Also, at first sight, the discourse of dissidence, with its emphasis on democracy and Human Rights, might find particular sympathy toward the neoconservative project as described by its advocates. Yet, the continuity between neoconservatism and dissident discourse seems rather inconclusive. Dissident movements were very diverse in essence, but many of them were focused on defending Human Rights, and not on foreign policy, as the case of the ‘Charter 77’ shows in Czechoslovakia. For all of them, the idea of justifying torture is highly probably simply out of imagination, contrarily to one of the leading neocons pundit, Charles Krauthammer¹⁴. A study of former dissidents’ discourse confirms besides that there can be established no direct links between the two kinds of discourse¹⁵, although some dissidents are today undoubtedly close to the neoconservative rhetoric. As regards them (in the case of the Iraq war and the struggle against ‘Islamofascism’), Tony Judt regrets that “*self-deluding foreigners readily mistake the US president’s myopic rigidity for their own moral rectitude*”¹⁶. In this sense, some former dissidents are used as a resource by neocons, who use their moral credit, as they have done previously with Leo Strauss¹⁷.

Conclusion. What the Open Letter reveals

The Open Letter gives an insight on how the U.S. foreign policy is perceived by some countries that enjoyed a privileged relationship with the White House during the Bush administration. In that sense, its interpretation of the current situation in Washington D.C., as

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well as its understanding, may be singled out when compared with Western Europe. The Russian – Georgian war of August 2008 has definitely strengthened a sense of insecurity in this region, although the risks of a new outburst of violence are closely associated with the Caucasus. Interestingly enough, the Letter lies in the absence of condemnation of the G. W. Bush foreign policy, which may explain the current failures. The fact that the Iraq war has weakened the US leadership is for instance overlooked, and not taken into account. The consequences are deplored, but the origins are not delineated.

Overall, the local critics of Obama's policy seem more strategic or fear-based than ideological in nature. It remains to be seen if better relations between the U.S. and Russia would lead toward a less tense climate at a sub-regional level or on the contrary nurture nationalist and populist movements in Central Europe.

¹ The letter can be read in English at:

http://www.rferl.org/content/An_Open_Letter_To_The_Obama_Administration_From_Central_And_Eastern_Europe/1778449.html

² Valdas Adamkus, Martin Butora, Emil Constantinescu, Pavol Demes, Lubos Dobrovsky, Matyas Eorsi, Istvan Gyarmati, Vaclav Havel, Rastislav Kacer, Sandra Kalniete, Karel Schwarzenberg, Michal Kovac, Ivan Krastev, Alexander Kwasniewski, Mart Laar, Kadri Liik, Janos Martonyi, Janusz Onyszkiewicz, Adam Rotfeld, Vaira Vike-Freiberga, Alexandr Vondra, Lech Walesa.

³ Heather Maher, “In Open Letter, CEE Leaders Warn Obama That U.S. Ties May Be Slipping”, *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, 17 July 2009, available at: http://www.rferl.org/content/In_Open_Letter_CEE_Leaders_Warn_Obama_That_US_Ties_May_Be_Slipping/1779022.html

⁴ On this concept, see David Cadier, “CFSP and Central European Strategic Cultures: the Visegrad countries and the Georgian crisis”, *EU – Consent PhD – Award (3rd) Winner 2009*, February 2009, available at: http://www.eu-consent.net/library/phd/Award-winner3_2009.pdf

⁵ “55% Polakow przeciw budowie tarczy” [55% Poles against building the shield], *Wiadomosci*, 17 July 2009, available at: <http://wiadomosci.wp.pl/kat,1342,title,55-Polakow-przeciw-budowie-tarczy,wid,9029388,wiadomosc.html>; on this issue in Czech Republic, see David Cadier, “Bouclier antimissile : réactions centre-européennes”, *Telos*, 30 September 2009, available at http://www.telos-eu.com/fr/article/bouclier_antimissile_reactions_centre_europeenne

⁶ Florent Parmentier, “Obama and Russian Pluralism: Dialogue instead of Doctrine”, *When empire papers* n°1, September 2009, available at www.euro-power.eu

⁷ Nicholas Kulish, “Eastern Europe Uneasy Over U.S. Ties With Russia”, *New York Times*, 16 July 2009, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/17/world/europe/17europe.html>

⁸ See Didier Chaudet, Florent Parmentier, Benoît Pélpidas, *When Empire Meets Nationalism. Power Politics in the USA and Russia*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2009, pp.80-81 and 83-98. The pseudo-imperial nationalism presupposes a transformational power which stifles the imperial inspiration that animated it through the neglect of the other and a closing in on itself that removes all meaning from territorial expansion.

⁹ As a former US military intelligence officer (1979 – 1990) and vice President for Strategy and Planning at Lockheed Martin Corporation (1993 – 2002), he has a good knowledge of military circles. He was also the President of the US Committee on NATO, a non-profit corporation formed in 1996 to promote the expansion of NATO. Yet, he also has many connections with neoconservative and assertive nationalist circles, since he was a former director of the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), a group co-founded by William Kristol and Robert Kagan. Moreover, he was also a former adviser to Frank Gaffney’s Center for Security Policy and to the American Enterprise Institute. Considering his background, it is easy to guess why he knows how to articulate the liberal rhetoric of democracy promotion (he is a founder and president of the Project on Transitional Democracy) and the militaristic rhetoric of assertive nationalists (and neocons).

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¹⁰ The Vilnius Letter supporting a US military intervention in Iraq was signed 6 February 2003, and comprised ten countries: Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. According to many sources, Bruce P. Jackson was involved in the drafting, and pressured these countries about their possible entrance in NATO. See Philip H. Gordon, Jeremy Shapiro, *Allies at war: America, Europe and the Crisis over Iraq*, New York, McGraw – Hill, 2004, p.132

¹¹ “Bruce Jackson”, 18 November 2007, available at: http://www.rightweb.irc-online.org/profile/Jackson_Bruce

¹² Democracy promotion, particularly towards the Muslim world, is rather instrumental. Didier Chaudet, Florent Parmentier, Benoît Pélopidas, *op. cit.*, p.84, and see for instance p.149-155 for Central Asia.

¹³ On this issue, see Andrei Tsygankov, *Russophobia: Anti-Russian Lobby and American Foreign Policy*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

¹⁴ Charles Krauthammer, “The Truth about Torture. It’s time to be honest with terrible things”, *The Weekly Standard*, 5 December 2005, available at: <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/006/400rhqav.asp>

¹⁵ Jeni Schaller, “Neoconservatives Among Us? A Study of Former Dissidents’ Discourse”, *Perspective: The Central European Review of International Affairs*, n°25, 2005, pp.43-62.

¹⁶ Tony Judt, “Bush’s Useful Idiots. Tony Judt on the Strange Death of Liberal America”, *London Review of Books*, 21 September 2006, available at: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n18/judt01.html>

¹⁷ Didier Chaudet, Florent Parmentier, Benoît Pélopidas, *op. cit.*, p.19-25.