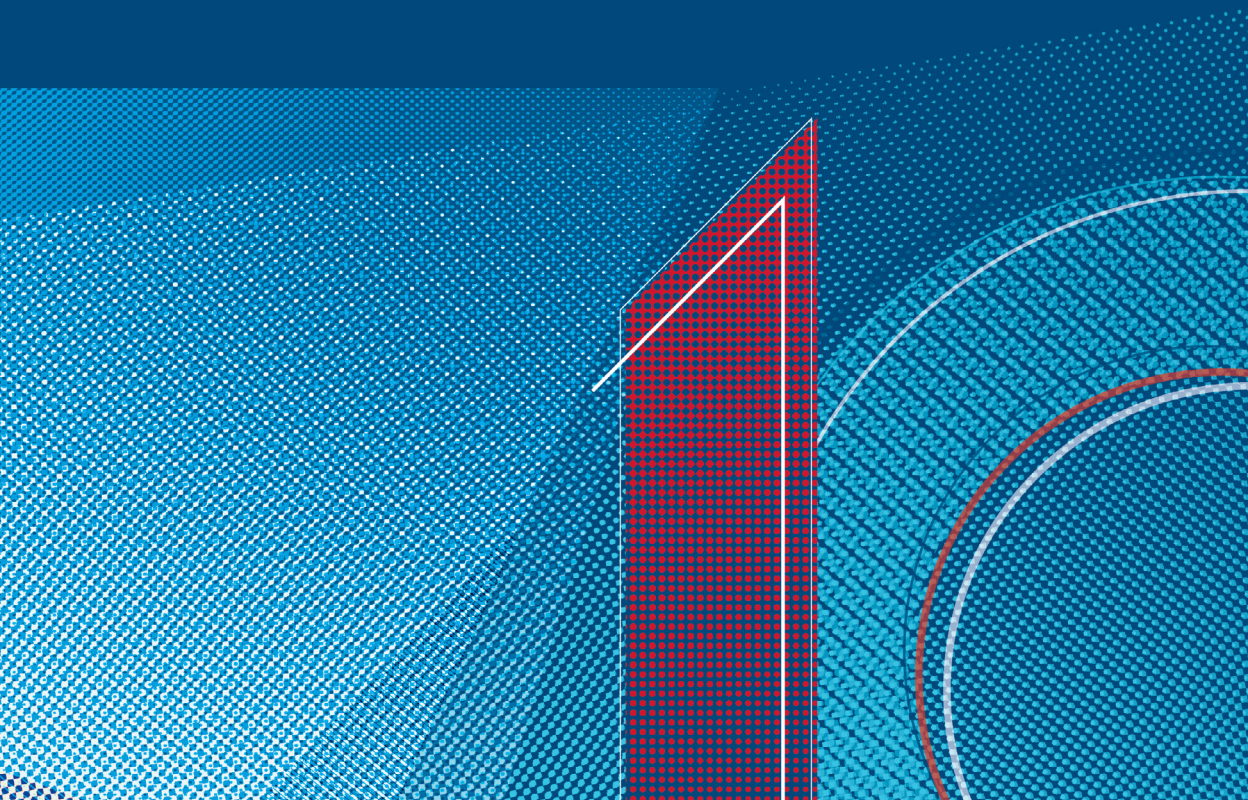


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The Shape of (Central) Europe 2022



Aspen Young Leaders

Long Live Maintenance

Hana Martínková, podcaster / Foreign Policy Adviser

The phrase “Winter is coming” has become a popular slogan thanks to the Game of Thrones TV series. It is attributed to the House Stark, ruling over a region with harsh winters and hence their motto; reminding them to prepare for hardship because it will come – sooner or later. In 2022, however, Europe will face similar difficulties. Instead of snowstorms, though, what we can expect is inhospitality in the form of a threat to living standards, reminiscent of the 1970s and the oil shocks of that time.

Politicians and officials face a number of challenges. Given social inequalities, maintaining quality living conditions is a challenge even in peacetime, and ensuring that citizens of the West can lead a decent lifestyle, without a significant drop in their well-being, will be much more demanding. Another problem entirely will be preserving the political system as such. The continuity of an order that has failed to protect them will not be high on the priority list of desperate citizens whose living costs are spiralling out of control.

All levels of government and EU institutions are striving to find solutions. However, there is one other thing that will throw sand in the gears of social cohesion. Humans are – at times – successful in accomplishing great feats: getting a man on the Moon within a decade, developing a vaccine for a new disease within months, welcoming a large number of Ukrainian refugees within weeks. A bigger challenge, however, is the maintenance of institutions that have already been built, and their cultivation. We do not often give sufficient credit for keeping things running and ensuring they will keep on doing so.

Western political systems are based on values. At least, that is what our constitutions say. What we may have failed with is in showing the value of these values, i.e. explaining why they are important and valuable. And we have failed to lead by example. Explanations of people’s susceptibility to populist narratives often tend to leave out legitimate grievances about the inability of nations to ensure basic fairness, as well as the void left by the pursuit of individual consumption rather than basic goods.

If we want to address the roots of the social polarization we are witnessing today, we also have to address the lack of maintenance of what we have built and the emptiness of the

sense of values we declare. In difficult times, the instinct is often to turn to providing for our own needs first and retreating into the private sphere. This is an understandable, but short-sighted instinct. Now that we are racing against time to keep the planet fit for humans, we need all the resources we can muster: government budgets, private money, time, energy and the brains of the whole society. We cannot afford not to pull together. Let's strive to maintain the current order – and when the winter is over, let's improve in maintaining what we have built.

Value-based Leadership Requires Accepting the Costs of Difficult Decisions

Jakub Dovčík, Policy Adviser, Office of the Prime Minister of Slovakia

In a recent book entitled *The Broken Constitution*, Harvard law professor Noah Feldman describes the deliberate and repeated violations of the United States Constitution by President Abraham Lincoln. Suspension of the *habeas corpus*¹ imprisonments of political opponents, and bans on newspapers critical of the conduct of war – these are only examples of the abuses of the Constitution by the man who, in his first inaugural speech, spent so much time explaining his loyalty towards the “whole Constitution”.

One can easily be dismayed by these violations of the rule of law, which in Feldman's opinion were a means to the greater goal of transforming the US Constitution into a moral document.

Today's reader can hardly fail to see some similarities with the extraordinary measures taken by governments around the globe, including the administration I work for, in fighting the global pandemic of the Coronavirus disease; be it mandatory quarantines or forced closures of businesses – all of which were heavily protested.

While some may view these measures as a violation of the values of a free democratic society and constitutional rights, I believe quite the contrary. I see them as exemplifications of adherence to higher values; in our case, to protecting lives in times of great uncertainty.

Personal freedoms and freedom to conduct a business were confronted with unpopular but necessary public health restrictions which were especially demanding in the

1) **Habeas corpus** – fundamental right in the Constitution that protects against unlawful and indefinite imprisonment.

later stages of the pandemic waves when the general fatigue from the measures fell heavily on the vast majority of people. Accepting these costs was, I believe, a demonstration of true leadership that recognizes the priorities of the common good of society over private interests.

Supplies of defensive systems to Ukraine have caused a similar confrontation. In a country like Slovakia, with such a strong pro-Russian sentiment evident in so many opinion polls (especially during fiscally strenuous times), the decision to support our neighbor in the fight against brutal aggression involved accepting the costs of domestic dissent, and subsequent harsh criticism, claiming the support of our democratic allies, was threatening our energy security.

While the choice is never easy, ultimately, value-based leadership is not so much about unflinching adherence to an ideologically pure position, but rather about staying true to the core values a leader has. That includes accepting both the financial and political costs of the difficult decisions.

The Ability to Change

Tímea Szőke, Co-director, KÉK-Contemporary Architecture Centre in Budapest

As the strange cadence of the last couple of years continues, one might feel like they are flapping, turning, bending, and snapping in the wind, as they face non-stop news and stories about the post-pandemic world, the undeniable effects of climate change with natural disasters, and massive droughts across the globe. Added to this, there is the recent war in Ukraine, resulting in a wave of refugees across Europe and having other consequences such as the energy crisis and inflation. When we have a split second to look up from all this turbulence, that is the time for us to reflect on our values, noticing both the outstanding leadership and the lack of it.

It is getting harder and harder at present to be a proud Hungarian, as fundamental values like democracy, Europeanness, transparency, and open-mindedness – and even some human rights – are being challenged by Hungarian political forces. Our space for expression is shrinking, the cultural and educational initiatives are being depleted, and businesses and institutions face an economic crisis or are being weakened by the lack of funding or permits and the rapidly raising prices.

We are witnessing so many changes that perhaps the only thing we can be sure of is that we do not know what is awaiting us. According to Yuval Noah Harari, an Israeli historian and author, the most important thing to invest in, in the 21st century, is our ability to deal with change. Building resilience and the ability to see problems as opportunities are the most important attitudes we can adopt to navigate ourselves – as well as others – through the time of change and transition. Only then will we be able to constantly and instantly adapt to the challenges of the ever-changing environment while preserving our core values which are shaping the way we feed the vision of our very best selves.

In these times, I would love to see and contribute to a leadership that is prepared to make hard choices for the sake of the common good, and does the unexpected and sometimes the seemingly impossible to cater to the needs of communities. We have to be seen, heard, and out there to think outside of the box; we need to be creative and brave and work in and around the system in order to keep our heads up.

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