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A SECURITY COMMUNITY OR A GAME OF INTERESTS? OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS IN CENTRAL EUROPE DURING A TIME OF CRISIS

Abstract. The war in Ukraine and the multidimensional crisis in Europe are adversely affecting the position, ability, and possibilities of cooperation in Central Europe. For the past 30 years, the Central European nations, despite their natural differences, have been able to engage in lasting cooperation to ensure their own and the region's security. It seems that there has been a unique kind of cooperation for common interests, as Karl Deutsch puts it. Presently, we can see that, due to the decisions of voters, diverse interests, and the external position of the Central European nations, there are internal differences and divisions. In some cases, the region's nations have a specific kind of personal game of interests. The article will attempt to outline the latest and most relevant matters that are high on the region's agenda, particularly taking into account opportunities and threats.

Keywords: geopolitics; Poland; Central Europe; regional security; crisis

INTRODUCTION

Central Europe is an area facing clear political opportunities and threats. These mainly cover the broadly understood security, both at the national level of individual countries and across the entire region. The geopolitical changes that took place after 1989 changed the face of Central Europe. State independence and full sovereignty, especially denying political subordination to the USSR, constitute the indisputable *raison d'état* of each nation. New opportunities have appeared, including the forging of bonds among allied nations.

Unfortunately, the collapse of the bipolar division of the Cold War world period did not translate into the region's full stability and peaceful development. The security of most Central European countries was undoubtedly strengthened by

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their membership in NATO and the EU. New opportunities for cooperation appeared. At the same time, however, the “demons of war” returned: first in the Balkans and now in Ukraine. This condition has its roots in the neo-power ambitions of Russia and Vladimir Putin’s authoritarian regime. For this reason, Central Europe is facing many security threats.

The article aims to analyze the opportunities and threats concerning Central Europe’s security in the context of two trends: the implementation of the idea of a security community and the interplay between particular interests. The author attempts to answer two research questions: (1) What are the contemporary opportunities and threats for Central Europe in the area of security? (2) What prevails in Central Europe’s security: cooperation or interests?

An analysis will be made of research assumptions linked to the goal and research problem, based on selected examples in two areas – state and regional initiatives. In both cases, this is directly related to the region’s activity and position within NATO and the EU.

1. CENTRAL EUROPE AS A RESEARCH DOMAIN

Central Europe is a geopolitical fact¹. The region has developed a specific relationship between nations and states, with their rich histories, identities, and cultures. They possess similar experiences related to Western and Eastern influences². This is mostly due to the region’s situation and temporary dependence on Germany and Russia. Most certainly, we can say that the territory referred to as Central Europe fundamentally resounds in the closeness of its history, including the importance of Christianity, support for positive dialogue between the West and the East, political dependence on European powers and now, above all, its dependence on Russia.

This fact can directly shape the idea of a security community in the region³. Even though there is no way of avoiding differences between nations and states, which is so readily stressed by Central European sceptics, it seems that these controversies, specializations, and debates confirm the geopolitical reason for the region (Deutsch, et.al., 1957). In addition, independent and subjective Central

¹ The article analyzes the entire region, but especially considers the special role of Poland and the V4 countries.

² We can particularly recommend the work of, but not only, Tomáš Masaryk, Oskar Halecki, Jenő Szűcs, and Milan Kundera.

³ We can particularly recommend the work of, but not only, Timothy G. Ash, Norman Davis, Gerrard Delanty.

Europe is a clear sign of limiting the superpower ambitions of great nations and the EU itself, which is now striving (maybe to its detriment) to become a federation.

Studies and analyses on Central Europe after 1989 are immensely interesting. The systemic changes resulting from the Autumn of Nations created many opportunities and threats for the region's nations, both those newly reinstated (i.e. Czechia, Slovakia, the Baltic states) and those that began to enjoy full sovereignty (i.e. Poland and Hungary). This mostly concerns research in the special field of threats or political challenges (Nitszke, 2022; Wendt, 2019; Bujwid-Kurek and Mikucka-Wójtowicz, 2015; Kavaliauskas, 2012; Čajka, Iľdinský and Terem, 2008; Dahrendorf, 2005; Podraza, 2000; Cottey, 1995; Keohane, Nye and Hoffmann, 1993; Michta, 1992), including security (Procházka et al., 2023; Orzelska-Stączek and Bajda, 2021; Adamczyk and Siekierka, 2021; Gizicki, 2013; Madej, 2010; Balcerowicz et al., 2002; Luif, 2001; Gorka, 1999), economic development (Adam, 1999; Orłowski and Salvatore, 1997), and social changes (Thornton and Philipov, 2007; Zenderowski, 2004). Regional scholars and specialists prevail in this domain, although some reports have been published by European and global researchers as well. Therefore, despite the mentioned and defined problems related to the need to use the idea of Central Europe, the matter is by far topical and essential for many groups and communities.

2. MAXIMIZING OPPORTUNITIES AND COOPERATION

To assess cooperation within Central Europe, three examples will be provided. Particular success stories will be highlighted, where opportunities were exploited to the fullest extent possible.

The first example is accession to NATO and the EU. This was a turning point for Czechia, Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary. The Visegrad Group (V4), founded by these countries in 1991, also provided great support to the process (Strážay, 2021; Czyż, 2018; Cabada, 2018; Kuźelewska and Bartnicki, 2017). Significant was the fact that the Euro-Atlantic trajectory of integration was unanimously defined by all four nations after the commencement of the system shift in 1989. This initiative did not rely on diversification and becoming independent of political powers dominating these nations.⁴ This is especially important in the context of how this process has developed in Ukraine to date. Ukraine has not shown enough clarity throughout its many years of sovereignty since 1991.

⁴ The exception, of course, was Slovakia, which mainly in the years 1994-1998, due to policies of Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar, slowed the process of NATO membership.

The four nations showed not only great determination to achieve their goals but also carefully fulfilled the criteria and were involved in the initiatives of NATO and the EU in the pre-accession phase. An example of this is their participation in peaceful missions during the first war in Iraq and the Balkans. Thus, the Visegrad Group nations became unique models and negotiators for the remaining nations in the region. For many years, they succeeded in generating economic growth and performed very well in terms of employment and attracting inward investment. Concerning the V4's role and condition, there are many views spread particularly among external political actors and nations. A lack of coherency, conflicting interests, and mutual dislike are often highlighted. Even if such phenomena can be identified in the V4's history, it should be emphasized that they were generally overcome by undertaking relevant and common goals and interventions .

The best evidence that this cooperation makes sense is that it has been going on despite the fact that almost 35 years have passed from the defining of its the main goal: Euro-Atlantic integration. Of significance is that the V4 have the courage and conviction to play an essential and significant role both within NATO and the EU. This is particularly driven by the need for solidarity among allies, keeping in mind Article 5 of NATO and supporting the EU's rational, developmental initiatives that require unprecedented reforms.

The second example is the activity of Central European countries in the area of security related to the establishment of the Bucharest Nine (B9), (Wasilewski, 2022; Banasik, 2021; Orzelska-Stączek, 2020; Pawłowski, 2020; Terlikowski et al., 2019; Gerasymchuk, 2019). The events of 2014 related to Russia's occupation of the Crimea and support for separatists in Donbas, eastern Ukraine, made Central European countries aware that the post-Cold War time of "dormancy and security dividends" had now gone. Vladimir Putin's superpower ambitions to return to the concept of greater Russia and develop the so-called near abroad are becoming clearer than ever. These despotic, military plans have complicated matters across the region and have triggered consultation and communityzation of security policies and needs for closer military cooperation at NATO's eastern flank. This area is most vulnerable to possible disruptions and the escalation of war between NATO and Russia. This is another post-Cold War conjecture that is no longer impossible. It basically assumes that the USA is deeply interested in this kind of cooperation. President Joe Biden and NATO Secretary Jens Stoltenberg, in 2021 and 2023, respectively, said so during the B9 summit initiatives.

The security of the regions and that of the B9 nations is their shared reason of state. It requires maximum involvement and cooperation in matters that leave

no doubt. Of key significance is to stress the region's solidarity and cohesion. This needs the confirmation of the right of each state to be sovereign, to exist independently, and to develop while building high defense capacities, including deterrence.

It is difficult to imagine this taking place without the presence of troops and elements of ally defense in the participating nations. NATO forces in an obvious way fulfill these defense criteria, serving to defend a nation's territory, lives, and freedom of communities. They are not offensively directed towards any nation. Such an understanding of security policies must be beyond any other divisions resulting from individual political goals of particular nations.

The third example is cooperation under the Three Seas Initiative (3SI)⁵, (Gębska, 2022; Gizicki et al., 2022; Kuk, 2021; Bajda, 2020; Kowal and Orzel-ska-Stączek, 2019; Gizicki and Łoś, 2019). Following Poland and Croatia's inspirations in 2015, political and economic cooperation among the nations in the Three Seas region: the Adriatic, the Baltic Sea, and the Black Sea was taken to a next level. The thirteen nations creating the initiative have great economic potential. Yet, this potential has not been effectively used, especially internally, to strengthen the nations' and the region's position on global markets. Thus, it is urgent to make this process more dynamic, particularly by taking advantage of the opportunities existing within the EU and trans-Atlantic relationships. This mostly covered deeper cohesion and cooperation in such sectors as energy, transport, and digitalization.

This is particularly important in the context of strengthening regional security and making the region free from full or significant dependence on Russia's raw materials. The eastern part of the UE is also an important transport route on the north-south axis. The movement of goods and people, both for economic and tourist purposes, is on the increase. Thus, of significance is to build new and upgrade existing roads, rails, and airport networks. Market competition, more attractive investment projects, and stable local economies will become successive arguments for strengthening regional security.

The Three Seas Initiative has a transnational, European significance. The USA's advantage, expressed among others by President Donald Trump at the 2017 summit in Washington, shows that the region has gained in importance in many respects. We cannot ignore the fact that such cooperation has a marked political color. Some nations attempt to avoid this context. If, however, the 3SI is to develop, then it is to be done based on clear and concrete decisions of national author-

⁵ The thirteen nations of Central Europe are EU members: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Greece, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Hungary.

ities behind this initiative. It is intended as a forum strengthening European integration, functioning strictly within the EU rather than competing with it. The 3SI countries are a powerful component of the EU, both in terms of territory and population. This fact must be clearly understood in European institutions.

3. MINIMIZING THREATS AND RIVALRY

As regards threats to regional cooperation in Central Europe, three examples will be given. Particular challenges reveal that action should be taken to minimize the effects of possible differences among the nations.

One of the first and real threats is the political situation in some of the region's nations, including, for example, Bulgaria, Poland, and Slovakia. The polarized political debate, unstable authority, and a commonly shared view across the society that politicians omit to tackle important public matters influence the strength and significance of state institutions. On the one hand, this can comprise favorable conditions for destabilization by Russia, while on the other, it can serve as an argument for EU's necessary federation. In the minds of Eurocrats, it will contribute to the strengthening of Europe. This (doubtful) scenario is likely to result in the weakening of at least some nations, particularly in Central Europe.

It would create a serious problem with ensuring the security of individual nations if need be, but it is also significant for allies, particularly within NATO. This scenario might be conducive to attempts made by Russia, Belarus, and even China (Gould-Davies, 2022; Kazharski, Makarychev, 2021; Meunier, 2014) to perform destabilizing activities in the region. What is more, Central Europe, as indicated above, is still an important geo-strategic region for the USA. Even if we have many concerns about the American policies pursued locally, it is not possible to find alternatives to the role of the USA in stabilizing global and regional security.

Convinced of strengthening the EU's role, including in the area of security, by, for example, creating another institution or new ideas for a common, European army are not the strongest aspects of European integration. They are rather an attempt to strengthen Europe's administration or the role of the largest nations, including Germany and France, at the cost of, for example, Central European nations. The weak side of such actions, even dangers that they pose, has been highlighted through Brexit. It undermined NATO's cohesion, and most

EU countries are NATO members anyway. Duplicating the role of these organizations is neither effective nor desirable.

The second threat is to weaken arguments on behalf of Russia's unanimous isolation, a nation that fuels its superpower ambitions. This is mainly related to the relations among and evaluation of European nations in the context of the war in Ukraine. The reasons for this approach are diverse and partially mutually exclusive. On the one hand, we can point to Hungary, which, from the very beginning of the full-scale war launched on 24 February 2022, has maintained open to political exchange and contacts with the East, including Russia, mostly through trade and energy resource imports..

Hungary is criticizing EU's sanctions imposed on Russia, and they are slowing down Sweden's entry into NATO. They are also reluctant to provide military assistance to Ukraine, even though they considerably aided its war refugees by offering them shelter in various parts of Hungary. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's policies were quite clear and consistent, including a visit to Moscow in 2022. On the other hand, there are other EU nations that, despite applying often rigorous means against Russia, do not rule out the need to establish a relationship with Russia in a future that has not yet been precisely defined. The business as usual attitude is not sharply criticized. Some Western companies, including the banking and financial sectors, have never left the Russian market. The attitude towards the presence of Russians in the world's cultural and sports space is softening⁶. Some Western politicians express increasingly milder views about Russia.

Stopping the aggressive, brutal war machine used by Putin to promote Russia's neo-power status requires consistent actions on the part of states and organizations. Central Europe cannot afford to have its position, security, and sovereignty played out by Russia which further fuels internal doubts. A thoughtless and conciliatory eastern policy, especially towards Russia, of some countries or the EU will affect the coherence of attitudes and decisions. This will radically affect the entire region.

The third threat is related to the absence of quick and effective response to the ongoing crises, both among the countries of the region and in the international forum. After 2015, such crises have been associated with migration and European integration. The countries of Central Europe, especially the Visegrad countries, are no longer the so-called "new EU countries." In 2024, 20 years will have passed since their accession. Over this time, they have often inspired

⁶ An example is the decision for the eventual presence of Russian athletes under the neutral flag of the Olympic Games in Paris in 2024, or the return of Russians to sporting events in the leagues of various nations, such as the hockey competitions in Slovakia since 2023.

and led important debates and integration activities. The EU requires deep reforms that must be rested upon the actual foundations and integration goals expressed by the Founding Fathers. The axiological change, with excessive reliance on personal freedom and the simultaneous mass opening up to migration, is now causing Europe to lose its identity deeply rooted in Greek philosophy, Roman law, and Christianity. Attempts at a radical climate reform which demands that fossil fuels be abandoned to give way to the so-called clean energy lead to dwindling competitiveness, reduced agricultural production opportunities, as well as ignorance of defense objectives.

Pro-environmental attitudes are more than welcome, yet they cannot occur at the expense of other important areas and must not be limited to the relatively small territory of Europe. At the same time, no similar restrictions can be seen in Asia or North America. After 2015, Central European countries generally successfully opposed excessive migration to Europe and forced relocation of migrants. Problems experienced by the growing number of non-European communities, including those professing a different religion, culture, and tradition in many places across Europe indicate that the region's conviction of the need to limit or stop multiculturalism have been accurate. European institutions do not seem to understand that. Emerging radical and dangerous behavior involving migrants has a destabilizing effect on Europe, destroying its order and a sense of stability. The lack of an effective European policy towards identified challenges may result in many other problems.

The EU needs to stabilize and redefine its integration goals, bringing them back in line with the early underpinnings of the European community. Central European countries can jointly contribute to the effectiveness of the reform processes. They cannot afford to divide themselves, treat themselves as second-class members, or be thoughtless observers of often unfavorable ideas. Excessive submissiveness or even complexes in relation to Germany or France, or the attitude of executing orders for the privilege of a marginal or instrumental personal position in European institutions may also be a definitely negative phenomenon. Europe needs decisive leadership, both at the national and EU levels. Such leadership should not be limited to the strengthening of institutions and reducing the management level. In contrast, it should remain open to social development within the nations that make up the EU.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the analysis, several high-level observations can be made. They concern selected spaces and relate directly to the research goal and questions posed at the beginning.

First, Central Europe has a potential and takes advantage of many opportunities related to, among others, its location, selected goals and precisely defined security priorities. This primarily includes establishing many integration initiatives in the region and the Euro-Atlantic area (NATO, EU). Consistent implementation of strategic goals and allied cooperation is an inalienable element of Europe's *raison d'état*. The threats result from geopolitics and the escalation of conflicts on the part of Russia. Some of the problems are generated by overly optimistic or radical attitudes at the state level or within the EU itself.

Second, Central Europe is aware of the importance of cooperation and mutual support among the region's countries. This awareness has produced positive results due to accession to the EU and membership in NATO. Activities conducive to conflicts and competition have caused problems and negatively impacted the political and social conditions. Unfortunately, the threat in this respect is related primarily to Russia or European institutions taking advantage of internal rivalries among the region's countries.

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WSPÓLNOTA BEZPIECZEŃSTWA CZY GRA INTERESÓW? SZANSE I ZAGROŻENIA EUROPY ŚRODKOWEJ W CZASIE KRYZYSÓW

Streszczenie

Wojna na Ukrainie oraz wielowymiarowe kryzysy w Europie wydatnie wpływają na pozycję, chęci i możliwości współpracy państw Europy Środkowej. Przez ostatnie trzydzieści lat państwa te, mimo naturalnych różnic, wykazywały się dość trwałą współpracą związaną z zapewnianiem bezpieczeństwa sobie i w regionie. Wydaje się, że działała swoista wspólnota interesów w kontekście teorii Karla Deutscha. Współcześnie widać wyraźnie, że z uwagi na wewnętrzne decyzje wyborcze, zróżnicowane interesy i pozycję zewnętrzną państw Europy Środkowej występują wewnętrzne różnice i podziały. W części przypadków państwa regionu mają swoistą pokusę gry (właśnych) interesów. W artykule podjęta zostanie próba zarysowania najnowszych przedmiotowych zagadnień, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem szans i zagrożeń.

Słowa kluczowe: geopolityka; Europa Środkowa; bezpieczeństwo regionalne; kryzys