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Back to the Difficult Past: Central and Eastern Europe's Relationship with Russia¹

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The revolution in Ukraine has shown that the difficult history of Central and Eastern Europe ended neither with the collapse of the Soviet Union, nor with the enlargement of the European Union to the east. Moreover, Russia's violent reaction in the form annexing Crimea and supporting separatists in Donbas has set in motion a number of political processes, which have not only shaken international relations in Central and Eastern Europe, but have also shown the countries in the region that stability in this part of Europe is not a given. Thus, these countries, the vast majority of which are members of the European Union and NATO, face a serious problem regarding the further evolution of relations with Russia, not only in the political or economic dimension, but also in the military sphere.

Back to the Past

A quarter of a century after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central and Eastern Europe countries² are yet to re-establish and reshape their political identity and sovereignty. Many of them encountered serious difficulties, associated with Russian interference, which could not give up its "exclusive zone of influence." Because of internal problems in Ukraine and Belarus, connected to their lack of traditions of statehood and political culture, these nations have not developed as fully democratic states. What is worse, as in the case of Ukraine, power was in hands of local oligarchic groups, which tried to rule the state together with (or in opposition to) various special services. As a result, these countries are characterised by a facade of democracy.³ That situation, together with the high level of corruption, drove people in Ukraine to protest. Moreover, by standing under the flags of the EU, they opted for Western European values.

At the same time, Russia could not afford to lose Ukraine from its sphere of influence, because of political, social, ideological and last but not least military issues. Creating the Eurasian Economic Union without Ukraine gives it much lower economic and political importance. Ukraine, as one of the main orthodox

¹ This paper is based on conclusions reached by participants in the seminar "Central-Eastern Europe and Russia: A Slippery Slope," organised by PISM on 21 April 2015 in Warsaw. The author kindly thanks all of the participants for their contributions.

² Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, belonging to the EU and NATO, and Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine.

³ A.D. Rotfeld, "Porządek międzynarodowy. Parametry zmiany," *Sprawy Międzynarodowe*, no. 4, 2014, p. 34.

states belonging to the Russian cultural sphere of influence,⁴ is also pivotal for the *Ruskiy mir concept*.⁵ Neither could the Russian authorities imagine Ukraine in the Euro-Atlantic structures (especially NATO), also because they still treat these as the biggest potential political and military threat. Moreover, depriving Russia of bases in Crimea could also significantly reduce the Black Sea Fleet's operational capabilities.⁶ So, even if NATO accepted Ukraine's non-bloc status, Russia, driven by zero-sum logic, assumed that sooner or later the Alliance will want to expand its sphere of influence, which would lead to a reduction of the Russian zone.

Moreover, Russian policy towards Ukraine after the 2014 revolution has shown that the Russian political elite, which rules the state, has never come to terms of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of twelve new⁷ independent states in this area. From the Russian perspective, these countries do not have the right to make sovereign decisions on joining the Euro-Atlantic structures such as the European Union and NATO.⁸ That is why Russia will seek or to destabilise Ukraine or to change its constitutional order in such a way as to prevent the integration of the country with Euro-Atlantic structures.⁹

But it is worth noting that the revolution in Ukraine is also perceived as dangerous for Russia from the internal point of view, because the success of Ukrainians in changing corrupt and oligarchic authorities could generate the same feelings in significant parts of Russian society, which may lead to a revolutionary scenario in Russia. That is why the Kremlin will strive to further destabilise Ukraine, showing its own public that such a revolution brings only instability, economic deterioration and the pauperisation of the society. It is also a reason why Russia reacted so violently to what happened in Kyiv. Such a reaction also demonstrates that Russia still suffers from a post-imperial complex, which means that it still wants to have exclusive influence on its close neighbourhood and be one of the key players in the global arena.

At the same time, Russia's reaction to the Ukrainian revolution, especially the annexation of Crimea and its support for separatists in Donbas, raised the question of the future of the European order. The political strategy chosen by Russia, regarding frozen conflicts such as Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh, maintains the temporariness and tension in the post-Soviet space. Moreover, Moscow tends to use the Russian minority in the region instrumentally, as a pretext for interference in the internal affairs of neighbouring countries.¹⁰ All this means that Russia is determined to remain a main player in the region and will use all political, diplomatic and if necessary military tools to influence or alter the geopolitical decisions of neighbouring states.

Summing up, 40 years after the adoption of the Helsinki Act and 25 years after the Charter of Paris, which became the pillars of international order, the main problem for Europe is still instability. Russia has questioned norms and rules that were fixed in those documents,¹¹ and its policy is incompatible with existing international law. Therefore, the negotiation of new rules is an urgent political need, and the CEE countries should be particularly interested and involved in such a process.

⁴ Even where Russian Orthodox has its origins.

⁵ *Ruskiy mir* (Russian world) is the concept that assumes unification of those countries and nations (Belarus and Ukraine), that belong to the sphere of influence of Russian culture, language, and religion (the Orthodox Church).

⁶ This was one reason why Russia decided to annex the peninsula.

⁷ It was a different story with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania which joined the European Union and NATO, but are still vulnerable due to the Russian minorities living there. What is more, they are not considered to be part of the Russian world.

⁸ A.D. Rotfeld, *op. cit.*, pp. 35–36.

⁹ One way to do this may be to achieve a kind of federalisation of Ukraine, where each subject of the federation would have the right of veto in the decisions on integration with international organisations.

¹⁰ A.D. Rotfeld, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 31–32.

The Power of Unity

Central and Eastern Europe certainly cannot be treated as a unified region. It comprises countries belonging to the EU¹² and NATO, as well as those outside these organisations. Different CEE states also demonstrate different approaches towards Russia. Even among the EU CEE countries there are divergent visions of relations with Russia. What makes things more complicated is that individual Russian policies towards the CEE countries depend on their level of economic and energy dependence on Russia.¹³

Moreover, we can observe that pro-Russian structures have begun to be very active in countries of the region, especially those with strong historical links with Russia (as well as those that have no common border with this state), such as Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Hungary. The campaign in Slovakia, to organise a referendum on giving up NATO membership, is one such example.

The situation in Ukraine and the policy of sanctions (both from the EU and Russian side) hit the economies of the CEE EU countries, although not as sharply as was predicted. Nevertheless, cancellation of trade with Russia requires the governments of the region to support exporters in finding new markets, and has begun to be the subject of political debate. Moreover, the entire CEE region (including countries that do not belong to the EU) became less economically attractive, experienced a cooling investments climate, and lost connections with the Russian market, which will be difficult to counteract in the near future. For a better understanding of the CEE region, it is also worth taking into account the degree of dependence from Russian energy resources (especially gas) and the level of Russian minorities.

The Russian authorities count on the cancellation of sanctions both for political and economic reasons. It is obvious that the Russian economy, as well as some of the regions (such as Kaliningrad oblast), which had strong ties to the EU, suffer from the sanctions.¹⁴ Moreover, the maintenance of sanctions will mean serious additional damage to Russia's reputation, a decline in the level of credible foreign investments, and deepening dependency on such partners as China.¹⁵ At the same time, the abolition of sanctions would be promoted in Russia as a great success for Moscow, showing the lack of consistency in the policy of Western countries. Moreover, Russia would treat this as a weakness of the EU, and as a reason to cease treating it as an equal partner.

That is why the main challenge for the EU CEE countries is to maintain unity. It is particularly difficult, because of geographical proximity to Russia, history, and political and economic ties, all of which have influenced the approach of different countries to their eastern neighbour. Compared to Hungary and Slovakia, the Baltic States and Poland have a much sharper attitude towards Russian policy. Such divisions in the region (as well as in the rest of the EU) will undoubtedly be used by the Russian authorities, on the eve of discussions on the future of sanctions. Russia will try to undermine European unity, which is needed if sanctions are to continue. A consequence of disunity in the EU would be considered by Russia as consent to its policy in the region, and to the existence of an exclusive Russian zone of influence.

¹² Also called the EU CEE countries.

¹³ For more see D. Kałan, "To Have or to Be: The Dilemma of EU Sanctions on Russia for the V4," *PISM Bulletin*, no. 113 (708), 11 September 2014, www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=18107.

¹⁴ For more see J. Cwiek-Karpowicz, S. Secieru (eds.), *Sanctions and Russia*, PISM, Warsaw, 2015, pp. 47–90, www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=19045.

¹⁵ However, at the same time, sanctions may be used by Russian authorities as a perfect starting point for reforms aimed, for example, at replacing imports.

A Question of Trust: The Future of CEE–Russia Relations

Between the CEE countries that belong to the EU and Russia there is also a strong disagreement about the last 25 years. For Russia it has been a period of struggling with internal crisis, unsuccessful cooperation with the West, and slowly rebuilding its position as a superpower. For the Baltic States, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland, it has been a period of successful transformation, and of joining Western structures such as the European Union and NATO.

It is also important to remember that Russia still refers to its sphere of influence, and the Ukrainian revolution is perceived from such point of view. For Russia, it means that the EU and the U.S. simply tried to pull Ukraine into their sphere of influence, even though neither actually recognises such a model.

The determining factor for the effectiveness of any security system is the will of states and their commitment to defending the values and interests that justified the desirability of the established institution. The weakness of the current system on a regional (and global) scale is the false assumption that UN or OSCE members are guided by the same values, referred to as universal or European.¹⁶ So the main problem in relations among Western democracies and between these and Russia concerns a question of trust and the perception of geopolitical issues such as sphere of influence. Therefore, if the international aim is to be the creation of any new security institutions in Europe, it is necessary to establish the definition of the essential values on which they will be based. It will also allow future misunderstandings to be avoided, about the meaning of the concepts pivotal for security, such as territorial integrity, the right to make sovereign decisions and the right to intervene in the internal affairs of another state.

However, even if there is a limited level of trust among CEE countries themselves, from the perspective of the CEE region it will be better to improve existing rules and force Russia to respect the existing international order, instead of creating new structures. At the same time, all CEE countries agree that the only way to maintain channels of cooperation is to preserve relations with Russia, at least at a low level. This can be done by engaging Russia and the CEE countries in sub-regional or trans-border projects, especially in education, research, culture, and civil society.

How to Avoid a Repetition of the Difficult Past

While forming the new security concept, it will be crucial to base it not on interdependence, predictability and cooperation,¹⁷ not on force, intimidation, extortion and political subordination. The problem may, however, be that Russia with a “new opening” will want to dictate the terms of the new European order, guaranteeing itself the right to have its own sphere of influence. To give Russia the right to decide about the fate of the countries within its sphere of influence, under the pretext of maintaining future security in Europe, would also be to fall into a trap. This would be especially true if Russia leaves itself the right to modify such guarantees, interpreting changing situations to its own advantage.¹⁸

There are also serious doubts as to whether anything new can be put on the agenda of relations between CEE and Russia. This is all the more so as, without full Russian agreement, there will be only partial solutions to problems. It is necessary, therefore, to find a security structure in which Russia will play a real part, or at least will respect. Finding a solution that is satisfying for all parties will be very difficult, as great powers prefer bilateral contacts to multilateral institutions, which they usually tend to respect only when they serve their own interests.

At the same time, however, for the stabilisation of the situation in the region, it is necessary to revise pre-existing dialogue forums, such as the NATO–Russia Council,¹⁹ or to strengthen the role of the OSCE. The beginning of changes in this area should be the implementation of the Minsk agreements, which are a

¹⁶ A.D. Rotfeld, *op. cit.*, pp. 41–42.

¹⁷ Compare with: A.D. Rotfeld, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

¹⁸ Russia explained their breaking of guarantees of Ukraine’s territorial integrity by saying that the state had temporarily ceased to exist after the coup in Kyiv.

¹⁹ However, it is worth noting that political dialogue is ongoing.

precondition for the political solution of the conflict in Ukraine. However, it should be obvious that their implementation would not mean that the relationships in the region will return to the level they were at before 2014, because of the lack of trust triggered by Russia's unpredictability.

Moreover, the short-term aim is stabilisation in Ukraine, at least to the degree that would enable reforms to be implemented. For this purpose, and besides other measures (economic assistance), it will be necessary to strengthen the OSCE mission in Ukraine. Only then can there be any possibility of starting a discussion about a new partnership with Russia. However, sanctions related to the annexation of Crimea should be maintained, in order to demonstrate that Western democracies have not accepted a change of borders by force and will not accept such actions in future.

On the matter of new security institutions in Europe, NATO should stress that there were no promises made to the USSR or Russia about the Alliance's enlargement.²⁰

At the same time, NATO has to be prepared for changes in the Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation. It will also be necessary to rethink the role of the NATO–Russia Council. One of possible future area of cooperation can be finding new ways of cooperation, such as in combating terrorism connected, for example, with the Islamic State.²¹ However, such cooperation will only be possible when based on common interests, and not when used as a bargaining chip for gaining concessions in other areas. Another major challenge will be to shape a new system of arms control in such a way that could help to eliminate the probability of war.

Russia will also use all the weaknesses of NATO countries, beginning with the time-consuming procedures of decision taking in accordance with democratic procedures, and ending with a quick response to all military exercises that NATO leads in its eastern members, as could be observed in 2014 after Baltops and Sabre Strike and manoeuvres in the Baltic Sea.²²

At the same time, Central European NATO states should strive to implement the provisions of the summit in Wales.²³ Moreover, NATO has to develop its public diplomacy, both in partner states and between members of the Alliance, in order to avoid the situation that is currently taking place in Slovakia, where the importance of the Alliance is being questioned.

Without engaging the whole EU, and especially Germany, there are almost no chances of improving existing security institutions or forming new ones. That is why the CEE countries (or at least Poland and the Baltic States) have to lobby for starting a serious debate on such issues. Countries such as Finland (as the state in which the Helsinki Act was signed), Sweden (as a one of the initiators of the Eastern Partnership) and The Netherlands (as a one of main promoters of democracy and human rights) should also be engaged. Among other things, implementation of the energy union, which guarantees the CEE countries greater energy security, will favour greater unity of the CEE region and will not allow Russia to use the energy card in bilateral relations.

During the coming months it will be extremely important for the European Union to remain united in the approach towards Russia, because otherwise the Russian authorities will feel free to interfere in the internal affairs not only of Ukraine, but also of Belarus, Moldova, Armenia and Georgia. Allowing Russia to

²⁰ For more see: S. Pifer, "Did NATO Promise Not to Enlarge? Gorbachov Says No," *Brookings*, 6 November 2014, www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/2014/11/06-nato-no-promise-enlarge-gorbachev-pifer; A. Applebaum, "The Myth of Russian Humiliation," *The Washington Post*, 17 October 2014, www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/anne-applebaum-nato-pays-a-heavy-price-for-giving-russia-too-much-credits-true-achievement-under-threat/2014/10/17/5b3a6f2a-5617-11e4-809b-8cc0a295c773_story.html.

²¹ It is likely that Russia will be interested in such cooperation. For more, see A.M. Dwyer, K. Rękawek, "The Islamic State: A Threat to Russia," *PISM Bulletin*, no. 3 (735), 8 January 2015, www.pism.pl/publications/bulletin/no-3-735.

²² A.M. Dwyer, "Russian Military Exercises: A Message for Opponents and Allies Alike," *PISM Bulletin*, no.99 (694), 16 July 2014, www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=17857.

²³ For more see W. Lorenz, "NATO Spearhead Needs a Shield on the Eastern Flank," *PISM Bulletin*, no. 16 (748), 9 February 2015, www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=19215; W. Lorenz, "NATO Narrows Military Gap on Its Eastern Flank," *PISM Strategic File*, no. 20 (56), September 2014, www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=18080.

cite sphere of influence to legitimise its actions will also automatically mean the total failure of any integration projects such as the Eastern Partnership, and will require a complete revision of the EU's eastern policy.

Re-establishing the working security structures will be important not only from the European point of view, for a situation in which one state (Russia) is breaking the rules and faces no international reaction could encourage other world political players (such as China) to behave on such a way. However, until Russia returns to the path of law, it cannot be the initiator of new projects, because it is untrustworthy.

Changes in the policy of both the European Union and NATO should be inaugurated by the CEE countries, as the future of relations with Russia has particular importance to them. Otherwise, the CEE region will be threatened by the prospect of a return to a difficult past.