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# SECURITY IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE IN A PERIOD OF STRATEGIC SHOCKS

**Abstract:** The study examines the security policy shocks and responses to these shocks in the countries and societies of the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region, and how these shocks and responses have changed the relationship of CEE countries with the European Union since 2008. It interprets the financial and economic crisis of 2008, the illegal Russian annexation of Crimea and Russian support for separatism in Eastern Ukraine from 2014, the migration crisis of 2015, the Covid-19 epidemic and the escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian war in February 2022 as a security shock. It concludes that while CEE countries have improved their crisis management capacity, they often rely more on national solutions than on joint European crisis management actions.

**Keywords:** CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE, CEE COUNTRIES, FINANCIAL AND ECONOMIC CRISIS, MIGRATION CRISIS, COVID-19 PANDEMIC, RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR.

Our study looks at the security of the Central and Eastern European region<sup>1</sup> (CEE) over the last decade and a half. Its aim is to describe in brief the strategic processes of security in the region in the broad sense, and the factors and events that have shaped these processes to the greatest extent.

## On the interpretative framework

Since 2009, in several writings, we have sought to draw attention to the fact that, broadly speaking, the security of the states and societies of the CEE region is defined by three major integration processes: *renationalisation* (national integration), *Europeanisation* (European integration) and *globalisation* (interdependent global integration). (TÁLAS 2009, 21-22; CSIKI – TÁLAS – VARGA 2013, 37) These processes are seen as the channels through which, on the one hand, the societies of the CEE region are influenced by world events and processes and, on the other hand, through which the CEE states, individually or in alliances, can influence and reflect on the outside world and the influences that come from it.

By renationalisation, we mean the continuation of a historically delayed and incomplete nation-building process, i.e. political nation-building. (SZŰCS 1983; BIBÓ 1986; OLTAY 2021a, 2021b) This refers to the sum of the efforts of local societies and their political elites whose main goal is to complete the sovereignty of their nation-state. (SZILÁGYI 2009, 63–65) These start from the defence of the state's territory and independence, to the creation of a strong and competitive national economy and a national entrepreneurial class, to the creation of a cultural elite that prefers national values. (TÁLAS 2009, 22; KERÉNYI 2021a; 2021b) The fact that the CEE region has been living in a modern (national) period of its own history, as opposed to the states at the centre of European integration, which are living in a postmodern period of their history, is most evident in the renationalisation process. (LACZÓ 2021; REVDEM 2021)

Europeanisation includes the efforts of the societies and political leaders of the CEE region to make their nation states and national economies catch up to the European economic centre, to draw on the modernisation experience of European capital and technology, to adapt European values to national needs and to incorporate their national values into European values. (TÁLAS 2009, 22) Although the strengthening of the sovereignty of the nation state is also an important political goal here, CEE countries must also achieve this – through integration – by sharing elements of sovereignty. (SZILÁGYI 2009, 65; WOŹNIAKOWSKI – SCHIMMELFENNIG – MATLAK 2018, 7–8) While renationalisation is seen as rivalry, Europeanisation is essentially a process of cooperation and compromise.

Finally, there is globalisation, where the main aspiration of societies and their leaders is to successfully connect their national economies to global value chains,

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1 In this study, the Central and Eastern European region is defined as the post-socialist bloc of EU member states, i.e. the Baltic countries, the V4 countries, Romania and Bulgaria, and the post-Yugoslav region, i.e. Slovenia and Croatia.

to attract job-creating and modernising foreign investment in a way that creates a beneficial balance between the interests of global value chains and companies and national economies for the CEE states. (TÁLAS 2009, 22; SZILÁGYI 2009, 67; CSIKI, TÁLAS, VARGA 2013, 37) Globalisation is seen as a process that encourages cooperation at the level of European integration and competition within the EU.

This framework of interpretations is still relevant today. We also maintain that the success of CEE states in successfully guaranteeing security in the broad sense is crucially determined by the ability of their political elites to harmonise the effects of the three integration processes, to reduce their negative consequences and to perpetuate their positive benefits. (CSIKI – TÁLAS – VARGA 2013, 38)

Over the past 15 years, a series of security policy events have shocked societies in the CEE region, significantly changing the security perception of the local societies and political elites – not only in relation to threats, but in many respects also in relation to each other and their allies. The financial and economic crisis of 2008, the illegal Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the start of the Russian–Ukrainian war, the refugee and migrant crisis of 2015, the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 and the escalation of the Russian–Ukrainian war of 24 February 2022 have followed each other so quickly that some experts speak of not of multiple crises but of a single multi-crisis. (BECKER 2022) In our view, this claim is not entirely justified, as these crises are not structurally related.

## **Strategic shocks (also) affecting CEE**

In this part of our study, we briefly review the strategic shocks that have affected the CEE region, focusing on how they have affected the security of the region and what impacts their management have had on the European integration and the relationship of CEE with integration.

### ***The 2008 financial and economic crisis***

The crisis initially started as a credit crunch, which made financial institutions fail, leading to a financial crisis. This in turn led to economic stagnation, falling demand, and rising unemployment, turning the original financial crisis into an economic crisis. The crisis, which started as a US story, quickly spread to Europe because of the close interconnections between their financial markets. Although many had hoped that CEE could escape a deep crisis (as it had initially proved resilient), declining investor interest in emerging markets and a collapse in investor confidence quickly dashed hopes of a region free of global turmoil. Although the crisis hit the CEE region hard as a result, the consequences across the region varied. Paradoxically, the non-euro area members of CEE (Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary) were less affected than the Baltic and South-Eastern European countries. (GARDÓ – MARTIN 2010, 22–40) This may have been closely related to the fact that the

EU's economic policy framework and instruments were essentially optimised for a growth environment in the years preceding the crisis, so that the EU initially lacked crisis management capabilities. In other words, the crisis of 2008 deepened in the absence of an effective management tool, paradoxically especially in the Eurozone, where the initial crisis management against the single currency was carried out at national level and through ad hoc actions. (PELLE, VÉGH 2019, 131–134) Although the EU eventually reformed the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), thus deepening integration, the 2008 crisis, which was followed by a four-year stagnation, saw the European Union suffer a significant loss of prestige due to its inability to take swift and effective crisis management action in the most integrated area, the financial/economic area.

The 2008 financial and economic crisis hit the defence sector of European countries particularly hard. The resource constraints resulting from budget cuts forced CEE national armed forces to make a general reduction in their defence capabilities. In doing so, they reduced their levels of international ambitions, their participation in crisis management operations, the size of their armed forces, downsized certain weapon groups, reduced the number of their military equipment or the objectives of their modernisation and capability development programmes. (CSIKI 2014, 77)

## ***Illegal Russian annexation of Crimea and Russian support for separatism in Eastern Ukraine***

Although some CEE countries (the Baltic States and Poland) had already drawn attention to the dangers of Russia's aggressive behaviour after the August 2008 Georgian–Russian war, the handling of the global financial and economic crisis that erupted in September 2008 kept the United States and the European Union busy for years. (TÁLAS 2013, 33) This was because it was only after the events in Ukraine between February and April 2014 – the Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea without armed struggle and the start of armed support for the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics declared by separatists in Eastern Ukraine – that NATO and the EU reacted more forcefully to Russian behaviour. Since Russia has violated four international treaties in which it had previously guaranteed Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity (the Belovezhskaya Pushcha Agreement of late 1991, which declared the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Budapest Memorandum of December 1994, the 1997 agreement on the stationing of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Ukraine, and the 1997 agreement on the territorial integrity of Ukraine, which declared the dissolution of the Soviet Union), the introduction of cautious financial and economic sanctions against Russia could not be avoided by those who, for various reasons, were more understanding and pragmatic towards the Russian leadership.

It is important to note that there were noticeable differences between the EU member states in their perception of Russia's international position, role, behaviour, and influence. Indeed, each country's policy towards Russia depends to a great extent on its geopolitical location and size, its historical experience with Russia, political attitudes, perception of the threat, and the nature and intensity of the country's economic and energy relations with Russia (or its desire to maintain them), not to mention other political considerations. For example, countries that were more dependent on Russian gas supplies or having economic relations with Russia crucial for their national economy tended to have a more pragmatic and understanding relationship with Moscow. However, for those whose history has been permanently defined by Russian imperialism, this pragmatism has understandably been overridden by fear of Russia (Sz. BÍRÓ 2018, 6–7).

The CEE's immediate region has never been, and still is not, homogeneous in its relations with Russia. Indeed, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have very different perceptions of what a desirable policy towards Moscow would be. In the CEE region, the Baltic States, Poland, and Romania have traditionally viewed Moscow with the greatest mistrust. However, their situation is not identical, because while the Baltic States and the Poles are able to assess their relations with Russia positively from time to time – mostly when Moscow is interested – Romania, which also perceives Russian ambitions as a threat, has fewer relations with Russia. (PORĘBA et al 2018, 54–61) Bucharest is the main focus of Kremlin attention because it is located in an important geopolitical area for Russia: the Black Sea coast. The Czech Republic meanwhile is trying to set itself aside from the CEE region as a whole. Even though there was a time when the country had a president sympathetic to Putin's Russia, most of the Czech political elite would have preferred to keep Moscow at a distance. In contrast to the distrustful or disinterested states in the region, the other pole is represented by Serbia, where both the political elite and the majority of society regard Russia as a friend, and who expect and support Moscow's active engagement in the region. Finally, there are some countries – including Hungary, along with Slovakia and Bulgaria – that are ready to cooperate with Moscow from time to time for various reasons. These countries, although they themselves have suffered grievances in the past, see no obstacle to relations based on mutual respect to pursue their interests. Although they do not consider Russia to be an ally at all, they do see it as a partner with whom it is possible and worthwhile to cooperate on pragmatic grounds and for economic reasons. (Sz. BÍRÓ 2018, 5–6; MILO 2021)

The emptying of the system of international/European security guarantees and the events in Ukraine, which – let us add – did not start with Crimea, but with the UN's un-mandated interventions in Kosovo and Iraq, and the slow weakening of international arms limitation regimes (e.g. the suspension of the CFE Treaty in 2007), that forced NATO to take action. At its summit in Newport in early September 2014, the Alliance took three important steps in response. First, it strengthened collective defence, essentially returning to the prioritisation of territorial defence. Then, it began the process of strengthening the CEE region, i.e. NATO's eastern

flank, in particular through the adoption of the *Allied Readiness Action Plan*, which called for the establishment of an *immediate reaction force* (*Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, VJTF*). The latter required, in turn, the deployment of an immediate response force, the construction of bases to receive it, and a regular rotation – but not permanent – NATO presence at the bases. Finally, thirdly, the alliance committed itself to the need to increase defence spending, and even stipulated that 20% of defence spending should be spent on the acquisition of major weapons systems and on research and development, i.e. technological modernisation. Another important decision, especially for Poland and the Baltic states, was that the alliance left it up to the member states to decide whether or not to support Ukraine militarily. (CSIKI – TÁLAS – VARGA 2014, 113–119)

Although NATO member states, including in CEE, were generally positive about the Alliance's decisions in Newport, satisfaction was not complete. For those countries that saw the Russian threat as an existential challenge to their security, and which had been warning of the dangers of Russia's aggressive policy since 2008, the West has proved overall to be too cautious. (GROSZKOWSKI, GNIAZDOWSKI, SADECKI 2014; TERLIKOWSKI 2018, 82, 105) There were several reasons for caution. First, Europe, dependent on Russian energy and with strong economic ties to Russia, did not want to provoke Putin, nor did it want a new Cold War. Second, the Western powers saw Moscow's behaviour as a sign of weakness rather than of strength, a sign of the failure of Russia's non-military means of asserting its interests in Ukraine. Thirdly, the United States and the European Union have opted for a policy of sanctions and have repeatedly made it clear that they do not want to engage with Ukraine in an armed way. Fourthly, the major NATO members considered the containment of the Islamic State and the Libyan crisis to be strategically more important than the Ukraine crisis. Finally, fifth, Germany has taken on the responsibility of dealing with the Ukrainian crisis, while Berlin wants a political solution and sees any military response as making the former more difficult. (CSIKI – TÁLAS – VARGA 2014, 113–114)

The “malcontents” of Central and Eastern Europe played an important role in the decision of NATO's Warsaw Summit in 2016 to go further down the Newport road and strengthen the Alliance's defence and deterrence capabilities, notably through increased defence spending and modernisation of its armed forces. A decision was also taken to deploy four volunteer, sustainable, forward deployed, rotational battalion battle groups (4,000 troops in total) to Poland and the three Baltic countries by early 2017, further strengthening the Eastern flank of the Alliance. (TÁLAS 2016, 98; SIPOSNÉ 2017, 123) It is worth mentioning that the changes after 2014 have favoured the modernisation of national armed forces in the region as a whole, and in more ways than one. Firstly, Russia's aggressive policy towards Ukraine has clearly justified, from a security point of view, the need for most CEE countries to increase their defence forces. Secondly, the few years of stagnation after the financial and economic crisis were replaced after 2014 by a more sustained period of growth in the region, which also made it financially possible to modernise the armed forces. Thirdly, by strengthening Article 5, i.e. by giving priority to territorial defence, NATO

has fulfilled a long-standing desire of the majority of the CEE countries since the early 1990s, when they had applied to NATO to obtain a guarantee of collective defence rather than a focus on missions outside NATO territory. Indeed, such initiatives latter were fundamentally alien to the strategic culture of CEE nations, given that their foreign and security ambitions had historically never crossed the borders of the CEE region. Fourthly, the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) took its second major step in 2016, following the recovery from the financial and economic crisis of 2008 – the creation of the European Defence Fund (EDF) and the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC), the adoption of the EU Capability Development Plan (CDP) and the Coordinated Annual Defence Review (CARD). This means that defence has become an increasingly important (and funded) area within the European Union. (NÁDUDVARI 2020, 112) Fifthly, as most countries in the region have not had the resources for a serious and comprehensive modernisation of their armed forces since the change of regime, the armaments of the local armed forces are simply obsolete. Sixth, most countries have seen parties come to power that are politically committed to the development of national armed forces.

## ***The 2015 migration crisis***

In 2015, Europe experienced an extraordinary migration crisis, unique in its scale, complexity, and root causes. More than 1.39 million people formally applied for asylum on the continent, and the European Border Agency (Frontex) estimates that up to 2 million refugees and migrants arrived in Europe during that year. (PEW 2016; FRONTEx 2017, 5) Indeed, the phenomenon is still referred to in political discourse as the worst refugee crisis on the European continent since the Second World War. In general, migration can become a security problem in two cases: when the longer-term social consequences are not considered and migrants are not integrated, or when migrants arrive in such large numbers and in such unexpected ways that local administrations are unable to receive and resettle them under normal policies. (TÁLAS 2019, 68–69) The latter can also be seen as the European migration crisis of 2015, but with restrictions. It is important to note that the 2015 migration wave and its consequences had different effects on the various EU member states, including the CEE member states, and to very different degrees. While some were affected to a very high degree (Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia), others were seriously affected (Bulgaria), and others were hardly affected at all (e.g. the Baltic States, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Romania). In other words, it was not the EU-28 as a whole that had to manage the migration flow, but the member states along the most congested migration routes and those hosting migrants. These included small EU member states (such as Hungary, which has a Schengen external border) whose asylum systems are designed and adapted to receive only a few thousand refugees. Thus in Hungary, the arrival of hundreds of thousands of migrants created a real crisis. The unexpectedness of the migrant wave is also debatable, for although the Syrian crisis undoubtedly triggered one of the largest refugee flows in generations,

Europe had faced significant migratory flows on several occasions before. Moreover, the problems of migration and illegal migration have been one of the priorities of European Union documents since 2005. In other words, it is not that the migration wave of 2015 hit Europe unexpectedly, but rather that Europe was unprepared. (TÁLAS 2018, 22)

There were four main reasons why the European Union's common European migration and asylum policy (covering asylum, immigration, and illegal migration) and its institutions failed to effectively address the 2015 migration crisis. Firstly, the EU has left too much room for interpretation to national governments when drafting asylum directives, as member states have been reluctant to cede their powers on immigration. This essentially explains the wide variation in asylum practices across the EU, which encourages refugees to choose the more welcoming EU member states as their destination. Secondly, the EU has not developed an effective mechanism for accountability and monitoring of compliance with the supposedly binding directives. Thirdly, the fact that some of the European rules, such as the Dublin III Regulation, have proved unenforceable in practice, as can be seen by, for example, the collapse of the Greek asylum system in 2011 and the chaotic events of the 2015 refugee wave in Hungary. Fourthly and finally, the EU has not given its European institutions responsibility for border management and asylum policy, the powers to enforce compliance with the common policy. In other words, the member states, who are known to have very different approaches to immigration and asylum, remain the main players in the common European immigration and asylum policy. (TÁLAS 2018, 22–23)

However, there was also a fifth reason for the failure of crisis management. This factor also meant that the 2015 migration crisis, unlike the financial and economic crisis of 2008, did not result in a unity and deepening of integration between member states, but increased mistrust between some member states and the EU institutions, and between member states themselves. This reason was the fact that the EU Commission, without due political prudence, tried to force a response from the CEE countries reluctant to accept refugees on an already complex and controversial issue. After the European Council agreed in June 2015 that the relocation of 60,000 refugees from Italy and Greece would be voluntary and that there would be no mandatory quota for all countries, the Justice and Home Affairs Council of 22 September, on a proposal from the Commission, voted in favour of the mandatory relocation of 120,000 refugees across the EU. Although the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia voted against the plan, the others overruled them. (BBC 2015a, 2015b) Hungary, Slovakia and Poland took the decision to the European Court of Justice, and Hungary lost its confidence in the EU's handling of the refugee crisis. Although the three countries eventually lost their court cases, the common asylum policy has still not been corrected. (VOVESZ 2020) The situation was further aggravated by the fact that in September 2015, Angela Merkel, seeing the backlog of refugees in Hungary, offered to take in refugees, but did not emphasise the exceptional nature of this step. Some in the CEE political



public interpreted this as an invitation to the refugees by the German Chancellor. (INOTAI 2017)

Although many explain the Visegrad Four's attitude to migration as a lack of solidarity, xenophobia or fear of foreigners, the situation is more complex. After all, the V4 has taken in large numbers of Chinese and Vietnamese, not to mention the masses of Ukrainian refugees and migrants following the escalation of the Russian–Ukrainian war in February 2022. This indicates that their problem is not with migration per se, but specifically with migrants from the Middle East and Africa. On the one hand, because of the political discourse and media narratives about terrorism in Europe, these societies have become convinced that Western Europe has failed to integrate Muslims and that its response to the migration crisis is wrong and contrary to European interests. Secondly, this is because many in the Visegrad region are convinced that migration flows can be triggered, managed, controlled, increased and reduced. This conviction could only be reinforced by the migration and border crisis of 2021–22, artificially created by the Belarusian leadership. (MARIN – DE BENDERN 2021) They also believe that if refugees are helped in the countries closest to where they live, they can be dissuaded from migration. Thirdly, although the Visegrad countries take note of their obligations under the Geneva Convention, they do not consider themselves obliged to assist asylum seekers who have already crossed several safe countries or have been in refugee camps. The V4 feel that, as they were neither colonial powers nor great powers with global ambitions, they have nothing to do with the situation in the Middle East or Africa. Finally, although their population is declining and ageing, the V4 do not believe that migrants from Africa or the Middle East will reverse this trend. As a consequence, the main efforts of the Visegrad Group since the 2015 migration crisis have been to reduce the number of migrants from the Middle East and Africa arriving in the European Union (e.g. fighting against people smugglers, border fences, sea blockades, forced return, communication campaign against illegal migration, etc.) and, in parallel, to increase the assistance to refugees in the European neighbourhood (increase in the number of asylum facilities). (HOKOVSKÝ 2016)

Although the EU Commission attempted to reform the common asylum policy in 2018, 2020 and 2023, they have been blocked by resistance from member states (including the V4).

## ***The Covid-19 pandemic***

The coronavirus pandemic shocked CEE societies in four ways. Firstly, because there had not been an epidemic of this scale and death toll in Europe since the Spanish flu pandemic after the First World War. The Covid-19 pandemic was a stark reminder of how unprepared the health systems of Europe, and of developed countries in general, were to deal rapidly with a pandemic of infectious disease (shortages of respirators, medical and epidemiological equipment, disinfectants, etc.). Secondly, in the initial phase of the pandemic, the management of the health

crisis was almost entirely the responsibility of the EU member states. According to many experts, EU institutions, in particular the Commission, which is responsible for common policies, were slow to react or to find their role. (NAVRACSICS 2021, 315–317; PETRI 2021, 329) It is important to note, however, that in the area of public health, it is the responsibility of the member states to organise and provide health services and medical care, and the EU could only play a complementary role in fulfilling the responsibilities of the member states under the legislation in force before the pandemic. Thirdly, because, in contrast to the relatively well-managed first wave of the pandemic, from the second wave onwards, governments and health systems in CEE did not perform very well in the management of the epidemic. This is illustrated by the high death rates per 100,000 inhabitants in many of the CEE countries and the wider region: Bulgaria (2nd globally), Hungary (3rd), Bosnia and Herzegovina (4th), Northern Macedonia (5th), Montenegro (6th), Croatia (7th), Czech Republic (9th), Slovakia (10th), Lithuania (12th), Romania (13th), Slovenia (15th), Latvia (18th) and Poland (21st). (JHU 2023) Finally, the pandemic marked the first time when CEE governments and government institutions were sharply confronted with the impact of conspiracy theories and fake news on crisis management and thus on security. Surveys showed that about one third of the population in CEE societies were susceptible to conspiracy theories and fake news about the epidemic and the health crisis. (GLOBSEC 2021, 50–59) The effectiveness of government communications is also evidenced by the fact that there was only one CEE country – the Czech Republic – where polls ranked the government among the top three most credible sources of news about Covid-19, and no CEE country where the national health authorities were ranked as the most credible source of news. (EP 2020, 47)

The European Union has supported national action against Covid-19 in four areas. Firstly, emergency response to the disease (limiting the spread of the virus; ensuring the availability of medical supplies; promoting research into treatments and vaccines; and supporting employment, businesses and the economy). Secondly, by coordinating certain crisis management areas at EU level (development, production and use of Covid-19 vaccines; testing strategies and mutual recognition of tests; cross-border contact tracing; quarantine rules; interoperable digital vaccination cards). Thirdly, the development of safe and effective vaccines against Covid-19 (reallocation of research funding to develop the most promising vaccines; coordination of European certification and licensing of new vaccines; joint vaccine procurement; coordination of distribution; digital Covid vaccine cards). Fourthly, the creation of a recovery fund to mitigate the effects of the Covid crisis, consisting of the EU's 7-year budget, the €1,074 billion Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and the €750 billion Next Generation EU (NGEU) Emergency Recovery Facility. The latter is a non-repayable grant of €390 billion and a loan of €360 billion (EU 2023). (NAVRACSICS 2021, 325; PETRI 2021, 332–334)

## ***Russian escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian war in February 2022***

According to many analysts, the importance of the Russian–Ukrainian war for the security of Europe and Central and Eastern Europe is most comparable to the changes that took place in 1991. (CHATHAM HOUSE 2023; MASTERS 2023; NEUMAN – HURT 2023) For this war is a post-hegemonic world order conflict. It was started by a nuclear superpower, a permanent member of the Security Council, Russia, which is seen by itself and many others as a global superpower, and which is seeking to change the international order established by the United States (the hegemon) and its allies, that is, as a challenger to the status quo. (CSIKI et al 2023) However, since the end of the war and its outcome are not yet in sight, we will try to be cautious in our study in several respects. On the one hand, we will concentrate only on the changes in the CEE region, and on the other hand, we will only make statements that are already clearly visible at this stage of the war. In addition, due to space constraints, we can only do this briefly and outline the most important consequences. We will therefore mention only a few of them.

1. The most immediate security policy impact of Russian aggression is that NATO has responded by further strengthening the eastern flank of the alliance. It has further increased the size and number of its multinational battle groups (from 4 to 8), increased its rapid reaction force (from 40,000 to 300,000), and its member states have committed to deploying supplies, facilities, and military equipment to the eastern flank. In addition, NATO member states have also sent troops to the CEE region under bilateral agreements. The number of US troops in CEE has increased to more than 14,000, practically doubling. Most – over 10,000 – of them are in Poland, and in an unprecedented move, the US 5th Corps forward command element is deploying to Poland, with air defence, logistics and support capabilities, even at corps level. (CSIKI VARGA – TÁLAS 2022, 6–8; DUTTA 2023, 10)

2. For the first time in its history, the European Union has given Ukraine lethal weapons as aid, providing more than €3.6 billion to the country's armed forces through the European Peace Facility (EPF) by March 2023. The EPF, which is used to reimburse EU members that send military equipment to Ukraine, was originally intended for countries outside Europe. The EU has also set up the EU Military Assistance Mission (EUMAM Ukraine) to support Kiev, which provides training for the Ukrainian armed forces. Through the mission, it provided €45 million in support to Ukraine until March 2023. (BERGMANN – TOYGÜR – SVENDSEN 2023; DUTTA 2023, 6) The EU has mobilised more than €67 billion in support for Ukraine since the conflict began. This includes €37.8 billion in economic aid, €17 billion in support for refugees and €12 billion in military aid. (IFW-KIEL 2023) In March 2022, the EU also put in place the Temporary Protection Directive for Ukrainian citizens displaced by the conflict. (DUTTA 2023, 6) In March 2022, the EU approved the Strategic Compass to enhance defence cooperation between member states and announced the creation of a

5,000-strong rapid reaction force. (COUNCIL OF EU 2023) The EU adopted a joint communication on the shortfalls in defence investment, with member states announcing an increase in defence spending and the creation of a joint defence procurement task force, and Denmark announcing its participation in EU security policy. (EC 2022; LIBOREIRO 2022; DUTTA 2023, 9) Finally, it is also worth noting that the European Union has, up to the time of writing, drawn up and implemented 10 packages of sanctions against Russia, with Poland and the Baltic states being the main proponents of tightening sanctions. (BARIGAZZI – KIJEWski 2023)

3. From a security and military point of view, the role of Central and Eastern Europe in the security of the European continent and the European Union has increased and is expected to remain important. Paradoxically, not only because the Russian–Ukrainian war is geographically adjacent to the region, but also because the events have politically strengthened those countries within the EU and NATO that have been trying to draw attention to the threat of Russian aggression since 2008. (DUTTA 2023, 12) There were the few in Europe who were not shocked and surprised by the escalation of the Russo–Ukrainian war in February, as they have historically the deepest and most authentic knowledge of the nature of Russian leadership. (KAMIŃSKI – Śliwa 2023) This unique knowledge, combined with the existential nature of the Russian threat to the security of their countries, has made Poland and the Baltic countries the most determined fighters and drivers of development in the face of Western support for Ukraine and increasingly tough international action against the Russian leadership. (FRANCIS 2023, ZEROFsky 2023) Their commitment is demonstrated by the fact that they are the ones who have made the biggest sacrifice in terms of GDP to help Ukraine, both militarily and in humanitarian terms – although Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Croatia are also high on the list. (IFW–KIEL 2023) The question, of course, is whether they will be able to find an ally among the Western member states of the European Union, in addition to their current allies, the United States and the United Kingdom, to provide lasting support to Ukraine and deter the Russian threat.

4. There is also a sense that the Russian–Ukrainian war and the resulting Finnish and Swedish membership of NATO has shifted the Alliance’s security policy focus to north-eastern Europe. This is illustrated by the fact that, for example, the “Leopard-2 coalition” (Poland, Finland, Norway, Spain, the Netherlands, and Denmark) built by Poland was able to change the internal dynamics of Europe, shifting NATO’s centre of gravity away from the Franco–German tandem. (RBA 2022; PETRONI 2022; MICHTA 2023) The question, of course, is whether the increased importance of security and defence in Europe will shift Europe’s centre of gravity politically. In other words, is the coalition of those strategically committed to Ukraine (the British–Polish–Ukrainian axis, supported by the United States) able to counterbalance the Franco–German tandem in terms of European security, and if so, to what extent? This depends very much on how persistent the Russian threat remains, and how much Poland will be able to strengthen economically in the coming years, and how constructive it will be within the EU. (PROCHWICZ–JAZOWSKA – WEBER 2023)

5. It is also clear that military aid to Ukraine has accelerated the modernisation of the armed forces of many CEE countries that have shipped Soviet or Russian-made weapons to Ukraine as aid. This not only supported Ukraine, but also relieved countries of a considerable burden by ridding themselves of obsolete weapons that were sooner or later destined for destruction. (OSW 2023)

6. Finally, while the Russia–Ukraine war has unified the CEE region, as it has unified Europe as a whole (all countries have voted in favour of sanctions packages and signed official NATO documents), this unity is underpinned by differences in approach between the countries of the region. While Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Czech Republic and Romania clearly see Russia and Russia’s policy towards Ukraine as a direct threat to their own and the region’s security, Bulgaria, Slovakia and Hungary see the war and Russian ambitions as a conflict within the post-Soviet space, and thus not a threat to either the region or to Europe. (OSW 2023)

## **Short conclusion**

One of the main lessons of the strategic security shocks is that the countries of the CEE region appear to be increasingly active in seeking responses to various crises. In addition, because of the EU and NATO membership, they are increasingly able to act, as they are richer, more modern, and more familiar with the institutions after 15, 20 or 25 years of membership, and have access to an increasing range of instruments. As a result, they can be meaningful partners to Western allies, sometimes initiating (or even preventing) joint action. The most important question to be answered is still whether the constraints and interdependence are strong enough, and whether the rationality and sense of reality of the political actors are strong enough, to think in terms of joint action (reinforcing regionalism and Europeanisation) by the second half of the 2020s, rather than relying on national responses above all else. This could lead to increased nationalism, fragmentation and, in the event of weakening EU and NATO frameworks, increased external vulnerability and local conflicts.



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# БЕЗБЕДНОСТ У ЦЕНТРАЛНОЈ И ИСТОЧНОЈ ЕВРОПИ У ПЕРИОДУ СТРАТЕШКИХ КРИЗА

**Апстракт:** Студија испитује шокове безбедносне политике и одговоре на ове шокове у земљама и друштвима региона централне и источне Европе (ЦИЕ) и како су ти шокови и одговори променили однос земаља ЦИЕ са Европском унијом од 2008. године. Она тумачи финансијску и економску кризу из 2008. године, незакониту руску анексију Крима и руску подршку сепаратизму у источној Украјини од 2014. године, миграциону кризу 2015. године, епидемију Ковида-19 и ескалацију руско-украјинског рата у фебруару 2022. као безбедносне шокове. Закључује се да иако су земље ЦИЕ унапредиле своје капацитете за управљање кризама, оне се често више ослањају на национална решења него на заједничке европске акције управљања кризама.

**Кључне речи:** ЦЕНТРАЛНА И ИСТОЧНА ЕВРОПА, ЗЕМЉЕ ЦЕНТРАЛНЕ И ИСТОЧНЕ ЕВРОПЕ, ФИНАНСИЈСКА И ЕКОНОМСКА КРИЗА, МИГРАЦИОНА КРИЗА, ПАНДЕМИЈА КОВИДА-19, РУСКО-УКРАЈИНСКИ РАТ.