Security Insecured: Central-Eastern Europe

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Main points:

- Central-Eastern Europe presents a bright example of so-called "security vacuum". The region comprises two groups of countries, one covered by NATO-umbrella, when the other is left unprotected.

- The Russian Federation remains the major security threat in Central-Europe, both for the NATO-member states, and NATO partner countries.

- New security threats constantly emerge in the international arena, which additionally endanger and destabilize security situation in Central-Eastern Europe.

Introduction

The theoretical background of the analysis refers to the conjunction of classical and modern western approaches towards understanding of national security. Basing themselves on their main provisions and tending to present the short-term security perspectives of Central-Eastern Europe, the authors use a systemic approach and structural-functional analysis. Therefore, the analysis is conducted through different security levels: individual and societal level, the security of the state as an institute, security of region/subregion. Taking into account the intense debate on the precise borders of the Central Eastern European region and for the purpose of a thorough analysis, the authors have chosen the narrow interpretation, which includes the Visegrad countries, and the Eastern partnership countries those that border V4 (Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, and Moldova), but also farther ones when it is needed for the aim of the paper. Having analyzed the security situation in Central-Eastern Europe since 2014, the authors have constructed a hierarchy of key threats, which considerably influence both the countries' domestic situations and their foreign policy, and in this way they will transform the security in the region.

Aggression of the Russian Federation

Current situation

In the context of Russian aggression, one can specify two groups of states: ones in the so-called 'grey zone', and others in the so-called 'umbrella zone'. The first group includes almost all states of the Eastern Partnership, which experience direct aggression from Moscow. Some of them have already lost parts of their territory or are unable to exercise control over there (Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova); others have flash-points on their territory (Azerbaijan,

Armenia). In fact, those countries are not allowed to decide how to ensure their national security. This is particularly visible when their political elites try to intensify their partnerships with NATO. Any serious moves trigger substantial counteraction from Moscow. As a separated case one can name Ukraine, which is being constantly attacked by Russia, stating that the country is part of its territory in every sense. So, the Eastern Partnership countries are fated to balance between the Russian Federation and the Western community, which leads to the domestic instability and weakening of their security, which in turn reduces the security of the Visegrad countries. The states in the so so-called 'umbrella zone' are called so due to their membership in NATO and the EU. Being preserved within these structures, they managed to secure economic and military positions, though countries differ in their scales of achievements. However, one should admit that internal developments within these countries, and external challenges NATO and the EU faced in the last five years, have affected the security of these states. Negative security* tendencies are visible at the individual and societal levels* (mainly in Poland and Hungary). Even more, the authorities of those states try to upgrade their national security at the expense of the individual and societal security.

Short-term (1-3 years) perspective

The security situation will not change substantially. The risk of emerging, continued and uncontrolled aggression will be preserved, especially towards Ukraine and Georgia. Their security threats can have either predictable, characteristics or volatile circumstances (sudden need for drinkable water in Crimea, need to increase approval ratings of Putin thanks to small victorious wars, need to oppose Washington to demonstrate an independent international behavior, etc.)

Uncontrolled/Illegal migration

Current situation

Both groups that are taken into consideration in this paper suffer from migration pressures, though not equally. It constitutes a more complex security threat (simultaneously at societal and state level) for Visegrad rather than for the Eastern Partnership countries. The V4 Group has elaborated a united anti-migration strategy, positioning migrants as a security threat and consequently opposing the EU. In their turn, the Eastern Partnership countries serve as

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transitioning migration routes, especially those that border the EU. In the case of Ukraine, the external migration security threat is burdened by the tremendous amount of internal displaced persons (approximately 1.5 million people) and its inability to control a part of its border with Russia.

Short-term (1-3 years) perspective

The authors believe that current situation will gradually worsen. Migration pressure on Europe, including Central-Eastern Europe, will rise due to the unstable economic situation worldwide, as well as due to the non-solutions for the existing conflicts in the Greater Middle East, which might provoke the emergence of new ones. In the case of Ukraine, internal migration will be determined by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Therefore, studied countries would be forced to deal simultaneously with a range of risk and threats at all security levels (societal, state and regional). As a result, security of the whole region will decrease.

Euroscepticism and political populism

Current situation

Rise in eurosceptisim and consequences of political populism are some of the most serious security threats in Central-Eastern Europe, though they have not reached a critical stage yet.".
The turbulent development of the European Union as an institution whose credibility was severely tested by migration crisis in 2015, Brexit and coronavirus pandemic can be defined as the major factors that have provoked the emergence of euroscepticism. The eroding institutional credibility of the EU is connected with the fact that Brussels loses its position as an attractive leader for its member-states, and especially for Visegrad countries. Additionally, China exercises considerable influence in the whole European Union, including the studied region, thus successfully challenging Brussels when offering an alternative model of cooperation and development, with no mention of the need to adhere shared EU values. The thirst for hasty solutions to complicated problems is also observed in the Eastern Partnership countries (mainly in Ukraine and Moldova). It can be argued the EU is not capable of designing workable and successful 'euro-integration' projects for the Eastern Partnership countries, which forces them to either look for other partners, or to keep the current unsatisfied situation. The EU's position as a leader for Central-Eastern Europe is further weakened by aggressive

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and effective information warfare, which is one of the key components of so-called Russian hybrid warfare. Hungary, Czech Republic and Ukraine are to be named as the most vulnerable countries in this case.

Short-term (1-3 years) perspective

The current situation will be preserved, euroscepticism and political populism trends will not disappear.

In the Visegrad countries, their negative influence will mainly affect their societies and individuals (such as the limitation of civil rights), but at the state and regional level the EU is still perceived as basis for their security. However, political populism will rise in the Eastern Partnership countries (especially in Ukraine), which might lead to the revision of their foreign policy perspectives, and also provoke security threats, particularly from Moscow.

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis

Current situation

COVID-19 itself, as well as comprehensive and sudden lockdowns (with further easing of restrictions) have become a serious challenge for all Central-Eastern European countries. Border closure, foreign and domestic isolation, reduction of economic activity, and mobility restrictions have caused severe limitations of rights, freedoms and ways of life that people and societies used to practice. In the beginning, states (with the exception of Belarus due to its refusal) managed to conduct cohesive politics (though often criticized) targeted at ensuring security at every level. In Ukraine, such politics have even resulted in temporary stabilization of the state institutions. However, after few months, quarantine measures have provoked internal tensions and accusations towards authoritarian temptations of authorities (particularly, in Poland). Staged, but advised and gradual, easing of restrictions is necessary for the restoration of constitutional guarantees for societies and peoples, as well as for ensuring the security of states (renewal of pre-pandemic functioning) and the whole region of Central-Eastern Europe (recovery of interstate cooperation and dialogue, especially in the security sphere).

Short-term (1-3 years) perspective

Nearly all restriction measures will be lifted. Taking into account the reduction of the virus' virulence and mortality rates, authors foresee only temporary localized quarantine measures, of a mainly adaptive nature. Countries of the studied region will elaborate on an agreed approach, balancing medical reasons and economic needs. Simultaneously, returning to a regular functioning will be accompanied with the regeneration of the internal and international security risks, especially for the Eastern Partnership countries (such as a recently transformed nuclear deterrence policy and the amendments to the Russian Constitution, which raise serious security concerns). Extra pressure will be generated by the global economic slowdown.

Environmental problems

Current situation

Though environmental problems do not pose critical security threats to the countries of Central-Eastern Europe at this current stage, the situation can change rapidly, as a number of factors defining the state of the environment is in constant observation and investigation. Environmental security should be provided at every level, as declared in the official documents of studied countries. However, despite obvious and noticeable ecology problems and climatic changes, countries choose to ignore interrelation between ecology and globalization. Poland serves as an example of disobedience with its high air pollution and deforestation of Belovezhskaya Pushcha. At the same time, Visegrad countries are forced to obey the European environmental legislation and European Green Deal, which is aimed at making the EU's economy more sustainable. Meanwhile, the Eastern Partnership countries practice lower environmental standards than declared, treating ecological threats as less menacing and direct in comparison to others, despite the growing number of ecological incidents both of natural and man-made character (the case of Ukraine is additionally burdened with the Chernobyl tragedy and its consequences to individual and societal security level).

Short-term (1-3 years) perspective

Undoubtedly, climate and environmentally-related challenges will become more influential in the future. These challenges, which might evolve into threats, will affect both the whole studied region and every country separately at every security level, simultaneously coupling with other threats and producing cumulative effects.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis of the major security threats for Central-Eastern Europe, the authors also define means of counterreaction:

- Structural pressure (military, political, economic, etc.) exercised by the Russian Federation is obvious in the studied region, while the so-called 'umbrella zone' experiences it much less. In the context of Eastern Partnership countries outside the 'umbrella zone' they should strive either to intensify its partnership with NATO, or to seek the full membership.

- States and societies of the studied region should take into account that traditional threats (military, political, illegal migration) will be preserved, however, new ones (like coronavirus pandemic) will intensify in the short-term perspective.

- Absence of a unified security system for all countries of Central-Eastern Europe leads to inability in both identifying security threats and reacting towards them. Thus to change and improve the situation creation of common consultation commissions with NATO is advised.

- As national security is strongly conjuncted with international security, countries of the region should promote closer cooperation to ensure both their own security and security of the region.

- Countries of Central-Eastern Europe should play more proactive role in the engagement of existing international security institutions, structures and platforms in the region to ensure security at national and regional level.

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