Introduction: The NATO and EU Relations of Central and Eastern European Nations

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The negative developments in the security environment of Europe in recent years have placed NATO and the European Union's defence policy to the centre of political debates in East Central Europe. The renewed tensions to the East with Russia in connection to the conflict in Ukraine as well as the security challenges emanating from Europe's southern periphery – illegal migration, terrorism, failing states – produced a paradigm shift in the perceptions and policy decisions related to security and defence in the countries of East Central Europe. As emphasised by the increasing military expenditures, the reform programs launched within the armed forces and new initiatives for regional defence cooperation, security and defence matters are once again at the centre of high politics. Within this context, re-evaluating the role of NATO and the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in East and Central Europe is unavoidable, if one seeks a better understanding of the defining political features of the region. The primary objective of this volume is to be a valuable tool in this endeavour.

In order to provide a general overview, the essays in the volume will cover the most significant aspects of the security and defence policy of the respective countries in the region. Understanding the general perceptions of NATO and the EU is the foundation for any deeper exploration of the related issues. Therefore, each paper will explore the perceptions on NATO and CSDP, the role of NATO and the main strategic objectives of the respective countries' accession and also public opinion and domestic rhetoric towards NATO and the EU. In this regard, highlighting the role of NATO and CSDP in the national security and defence policy as reflected in key strategic documents, sectoral policies and public discourse will be at the center of focus. For most of the countries examined in the volume, accession to these organisations was and still is a critical strategic objective. Therefore, conducting a review of the most significant factors and the motivations that formulated the desire to join NATO and the EU – from a security perspective regarding the latter – will reveal the perceived value of membership in these Euro-Atlantic institutions. Similarly, for those countries where membership in one or the other organisation is not a strategic objective, the reasons for abstention are worthy of mention. Alongside the perceptions reflected by the strategic decisions, policies and political debates of the political elites, the trends that can be revealed from the changes in public opinion and domestic rhetoric also constitute a critical aspect of our inquiry.

Taking also a historical perspective, the development of the institutional relations will also be examined. Although at a first glance, in case of many countries in our study, accession to these organisations seems to have been inevitable in retrospect; in reality, in the early 1990s it was far from given that they would occur (Asmus 2002). Hence, it is important to

take note of the fact that there were realistic alternatives for these countries concerning their security and defence policy orientation in the early post-Cold War period, with neutrality and closer security cooperation with Russia among the most common options. However, NATO and EU membership soon became the priority objective for most countries of the region (Asmus 2002).

Significant emphasis will be given to the role of NATO and EU CSDP in the domestic transition and defence reform programs the countries have experienced after the end of the cold war. In this context, topics ranging from democratic oversight to reform programs and capability development programs will be discussed in the light of NATO and CSDP strategic objectives. Lastly, the volume also seeks to cover the most relevant policy-specific questions in the field, such as perceptions towards Russia, contribution to NATO and CSDP missions and perspectives on NATO–EU burden sharing.

Placed between the great Western European powers to the West and Russia to the East, and directly exposed to the instability emanating from the Balkans and beyond Europe's southeastern periphery, the countries in East Central Europe share core geostrategic features. Historically exposed to the expansionist ambitions of great powers around them, support for a rule-based regional order and the quest to be a part of a stable European security architecture was a primary objective of the countries in the region after much of them regained their sovereignty at the end of the Cold War. However, the ten countries under the scope of our research – Austria, Croatia, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Ukraine – have quite significant differences in their strategic position and security and defence policy orientation. The perceptions and relationship towards Europe's two eminent post-War peace projects, NATO and the European Union have been a defining feature of the security and defence policy of the respective countries since the end of the Cold War. Seven of the ten countries have become members of both NATO and the EU, but even in their case, geography, diverging security perceptions, security challenges and domestic politics produce significant differences in their defence priorities. While the EU member Austria is unique in our study for its traditional neutrality, Serbia and Ukraine still remain outside NATO and the EU, and their future membership in one or both organisations remains uncertain.

Historical perspective: the transition period

The road to NATO and EU membership was far from straight. On the one hand, as the Soviet Union dissolved but the future of Europe was still uncertain, Eastern European countries began to think about different options as to their future place in the European security architecture. Neutrality was also given a serious consideration. In the early years of the 1990s, NATO was more concerned in improving its relations with Russia and the countries of the region were still at the beginning of a long and difficult transition process. Democratic institutions, economic challenges, the underdevelopment of the defence sector all were considered to be significant barriers for a quick integration process. Initially, NATO chose to draw closer the countries in the region to itself while at the same time not granting them full membership. The Partnership for Peace Program was first intended to give something meaningful providing incentives to continue with democratic reforms, while at the same

time avoiding to take steps that would risk relations with Russia and give all the security guarantees. Once the decisions were taken in the major Western powers to open up the doors of NATO and the EU, the Central and Eastern European countries aspiring to become members went through a similar path. However, depending on the preparedness and strategic location of the countries at play, the timing of accession was different. The most qualified three countries, Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary managed to secure membership in 1997 and became full members in 1999. The next round of NATO enlargement was not independent of the post-2001 environment where the United States was in a strong position to pursue its strategic interests and Russian–Western relations were relatively cooperative especially compared to the situation at present. Among the countries examined in the volume Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia successfully built upon the momentum and secured their membership at the 2002 Prague Summit.

The European Union took a different path. EU members decided that instead of a phased, gradual enlargement of the EU, Brussels would prefer a "big bang" enlargement. However, economic considerations, the quality of democratic institutions, and related political aspects played a much more significant role than the strategic–military aspects dominant from NATO's perspective. Security interests certainly played a role in the drive for EU membership, but the impact and significance was considered more indirect and more of a long-term development in the context of the integration process. Even these security interests were embedded in the long-term political and economic benefits of EU membership than the security guarantees provided by CSDP.

Transition, reform and investments in the defence sector

Except for Austria, the countries in the Central European region went through profound internal changes after the fall of the iron curtain. The transition affected all aspects of the security and defence sector, from the constitutional and legal conditions of the armed forces and their application to the primary tasks of the armed forces and their force posture. The requirements set out in the Copenhagen criteria in 1993 from the side of the EU and the Enlargement study set out the democratic functioning and the rule of law as basic requirements for accession to the organisations (COLE et al. 2005). The most important legal and institutional changes effecting the armed forces were undertaken even before the acceptance of the above-mentioned declarations (CAPARINI 2003). This included the adaptation of institutions, which ensured the democratic and civilian oversight of the armed forces. However, the complete, substantial transition and modernisation of the armed forces took much more time, and from many perspectives have not been completed yet. This included especially the modernisation of the armed forces. In much of the countries of the region, the "peace dividend" and the budgetary constraints as a consequence of the economic transition resulted in the underfunding of the defence sector. Within this context, the size of the armed forces was usually drastically reduced and the acquisition of equipment was delayed or abandoned. Ageing Soviet equipment unfit for NATO standards became a common feature of the armed forces of the region (CAPARINI 2003). However, the shrinking sizes and restructuring of the armed forces were not just the result of budgetary constraints, but the new security environment and the new tasks the armed forces were

required to undertake. This meant primarily participation in international peace support operations. Considering the leading role of NATO and the EU in such operations in the Balkans and elsewhere in Europe's neighbourhood, contributing to these missions became a requirement towards countries aspiring to be members of these organisations. Following also many old NATO and EU member countries, Eastern Europeans abandoned conscription and undertook a professionalisation process. The international peace support missions were also excellent opportunities to enhance interoperability between the forces of NATO members and applicant countries.

Restructuring of the Armed Forces also meant the implementation of new defence planning processes. After accession, capability development processes were largely driven by NATO force goals with a view on the commonly agreed missions of the Alliance. From the late 1990s, this meant putting a great emphasis on developing modest expeditionary capabilities and forces for peace support operations. Since 2014, a renewed emphasis on territorial defence and Article 5 has been driven not only by NATO requirements but also by direct national interests. In order to realise these force goals and improve capabilities, countries in the region have also developed multinational cooperative formats, such as the Visegrád Battlegroup. Although relatively modest in size and in their impact, these cooperative formats enhanced the reputation of the region and strengthened political relations among the counties in the region.

Security and defence policy

Although geographically located in one region, the security and defence policy perspectives of Central and Eastern European Countries with regards to NATO and EU CSDP differ as much as they are alike. Certainly, some common features can be found in most of the examined countries. As small states, they have followed the agenda set by greater powers within the Alliance or the EU. In this regard, the conditions set by the core focus and activities of NATO have been defined primarily by the United States. In the 1990s, the United States set the stage for out-of-area interventions and stabilisation operations. All smaller NATO members and non-members followed the U.S. lead into the Balkans, and with some reservations, even into the greater Middle East. The actual military contributions of the countries were usually small and complementary. However, there were noticeable differences depending on perceived security interests in the crisis region or depending on other considerations. Hungary and Romania have for instance maintained a robust military presence in Kosovo due to their geographic proximity and special interests in the region. On the other hand, countries such as Poland or Romania punched above their weight in Afghanistan. The reason for that was not some special interest of these Eastern European nations in Central Asia. The threat of international terrorism remained much lower in the Central and Eastern European region than in Western Europe. Instead, it was the conviction that long-term U.S. support for their own national security depended on a strong defence partnership with the U.S. and robust commitments by them for NATO operations. Generally, the stronger the Russian threat seemed to appear, the higher or qualitatively stronger the contribution was. However, the emergence of ISIS and the new wave of terrorism in Western Europe, and related

challenges such as the migration crisis have made countries in the region more sensitive towards threats from the Middle East.

On the other hand, Russia has never ceased to be a security challenge for the region. The re-emergence of Russia led by President Putin after the Millennia caused concerns in the region. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the war in Eastern Ukraine sought to have vindicated the region's concerns with regards to the risks Russia poses for regional stability and to their security. Although the most concerned are the Baltics, even countries such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia or Hungary have remained supportive of those NATO measures which sought to reassure front-line NATO states and which strengthened the defence and deterrence posture of the Alliance. In this context, Allied solidarity overall has been strong from a regional perspective as well. Some countries in the region, such as Romania also seek to build robust bilateral defence ties with the United States as a double insurance policy. Generally speaking, NATO members in the region have continued to push for NATO enlargement, which they see as a guarantee for regional security and stability. Moreover, in light of the new security threats, recently, countries in the region have finally begun to invest more in their defence capabilities. Although the increases so far have been far from enough to offset decades of underdevelopment in military capabilities, at least the trends have reversed and some noticeable results from the renewed emphasis in defence have already appeared.

In this context, one noticeable development in the region is the openness towards European defence cooperation initiatives. This interest focuses primarily on military capability development and defence industrial potential. The term "strategic autonomy", emphasised by the French, is still seen with suspicion, therefore, Central and Eastern Europeans tend to focus on the smaller practical benefits of EU cooperation as not to raise concerns in the United States. Nearly all of the countries participate in some PESCO projects in order to develop or improve a niche capability. Nevertheless, the basic principles on European defence remain to be similar to those of twenty years ago, meaning that no duplication or decoupling in relation to NATO would be welcome by NATO members in the region, not simply for strategic reasons, but for the limited resources they have. In this context, Brexit also deserves to be mentioned, where countries in the region are pushing for a soft Brexit in terms of security and defence relationship with the U.K.

The countries in the Central and Eastern European region will continue to rely on greater powers and multinational institutions to maintain their security. None of the current geopolitical and security challenges, let it be Russia, failing states in the South, terrorism or illegal migration appears to be weakening in the years to come. Therefore, preserving NATO and EU unified and strong on security and defence matters remain to be a strategic interest for the countries in the region. However, as this volume will elaborate, each country has its unique characteristics with regards to its history, geographical location, political system and strategic culture. Therefore, the perspectives on NATO and the European Union's security and defence policy within the context of CFSP, ESDP, CSDP will continue to deserve attention with the purpose of better understanding those regional political dynamics which will likely continue to shape the region.

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