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National Security in an Unsafe World – A Central European Perspective

Central Europe is a political, rather than a geographical, concept. It emerged a hundred years ago, in the aftermath of the First World War, which resulted in the collapse of two multi-national empires (the Russian and Austro–Hungarian) and in the emergence of several independent states (Czechoslovakia, Finland, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia and Poland) as well as the incorporation of Croatia and Slovenia in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians, which in 1929 became the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Austria and Hungary – two nation states established on the ruins of the Hapsburg Empire – suffered the consequences of defeat. In case of Hungary, the consequence of the Trianon Treaty was the separation of about one-third of ethnic Hungarians from the new Hungarian state. In case of Austria, the defeat meant the return to the century-old dilemma of her place in the broader community of German-speaking nations. All Central European states were exposed to the consequences of the rivalry between regional powers – Germany and the Soviet Union – and were too weak to protect their independence by their means alone. Local conflicts over territorial issues (such as Polish–Lithuanian, Polish–Czechoslovak, Hungarian–Romanian) made the political and military alliances of the Central European states impossible. Some of them – Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania – based their security strategies on alliance with France. Such strategy failed, mostly because of the dominant pacifist sentiments in France and Great Britain, which led to the policy of appeasement with Nazi Germany.

The Second World War turned Central Europe into the Soviet sphere of hegemony – both because of the military situation and due to the decisions made by the victorious power at the Yalta and Potsdam conferences in 1945. The imposition of Soviet hegemony constituted one of the reasons for prolonged conflict with democratic states of the West, but not the main reason, as suggested by some historians of this period.[1] The United States and Great Britain were ready to abandon Central Europe to the Soviet Union, but decided to stand up to the further attempt to expand the Soviet sphere of influence (in Greece, West Berlin, Korea). For forty-five years, Central Europe became the dependent part of the Soviet bloc. During this period two states in the Balkans – Yugoslavia and Albania – were able to free themselves from the Soviet hegemony, both remaining Communist dictatorships. In Central Europe, however, the Soviet hegemony remained intact until the emergence of the reformist leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev. Previous attempt to democratisation were put down by the Soviet armed forces (Hungary 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968) or paralysed by the threat of such intervention (Poland 1981).

[1] Mark Kramer and Vít Smetana (eds), *Imposing, Maintaining, and Tearing Open the Iron Curtain. The Cold War and East-Central Europe, 1945–1989* (Lanham: Lexington, 2014).

https://doi.org/10.36250/00983_02

Central Europe had to pay for the international arrangement that brought peace, but not freedom, to the European continent.

The peaceful transition from Communist regimes to democracy began thirty years ago in Central Europe and resulted in the total transformation of the geopolitical situation of this region. Central European states not only changed their internal regimes but also liberated themselves from the Soviet tutelage – the change made possible only because the Soviet Union was in the process of deep internal change, which in 1991 resulted in its dissolution. Historians of this period stress the crucial role played by the last Soviet leader, whose strategy of building 'a common European home' opened the door for peaceful change in Central Europe.[2] Twenty-five years ago, in the aftermath of the cold war and after the fall of Communist regimes in Europe, perception of the security situation in Europe was dominated by optimism.[3] Most of us believed that the century-old history of wars and hostility has come to its end. Such optimism was based on three main arguments:

The perspective of the world dominated by the United States led to the belief that the American leadership would lead to the peaceful resolution of conflicts and to the gradual expansion (by peaceful means) of liberal-democratic values. *Pax Americana* was seen as the fundamentally better alternative to ideological confrontation and to the conflicts based on national egoisms.

The peaceful transformation of the political climate in Europe, symbolised by the reconciliation between former enemies (German–French reconciliation followed by the German–Polish reconciliation) created hopes for friendly relations between former enemies. Considering the long and tragic history of the Polish–German conflict, such reconciliation was indeed a miracle.[4]

The disappearance of the ideological superpower – USSR – and the change of regime in Russia, as well as the weakening of her international position, were seen as guarantees of new, friendly relations between European nations.

In the following years the extension of NATO and of the European Union provided the Central European region with unprecedented feeling of security. Even the ethnic wars in former Yugoslavia have not weakened such atmosphere of security, partly because the NATO intervention in these military conflicts (in Bosnia–Herzegovina and in Kosovo) put an end to the war phases of these confrontations. In the Central European region, the system transformation was a peaceful process, including the 'velvet divorce' which marked the dissolution of Czechoslovakia.

Only few authors argued for caution and challenged the prevailing optimism. One of them was the prominent Israeli political scientist and diplomat (and my good friend of many years) Shlomo Avineri. In an essay on Eastern Europe, Avineri warned about the possibility of a 'return to history', by which he meant the heritage of authoritarianism

[2] Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).
[3] F Stephen Larrabee, *East European Security After the Cold War* (Santa Monica: Rand, 1993).
[4] Jerzy J Wiatr, *Polish–German Relations. The Miracle of Reconciliation* (Opladen–Berlin–Toronto: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2014).

and nationalism in East-Central Europe.[5] The other was Samuel P Huntington who – in his famous book on 'three waves of democratization' – warned about the possibility of a 'reverse wave' caused by 'authoritarian nationalism', 'religious fundamentalism', 'oligarchic authoritarianism' and/or 'populist dictatorships'.[6]

The most radical versions of such scenarios have not materialised – at least for the time being. In post-cold war East-Central Europe no democratic regime has been overthrown by force and no dictatorship has been established. While recent developments in Hungary and Poland lead many of us to the critical evaluation of the 'new authoritarianism',[7] they have not created dangers to peaceful relations between nations of our part of Europe.

Today, however, there are reasons to be concerned for the long-term implications of the political changes that took place in the early years of the 21st century. Four such changes are of greatest importance for the security situation of the nations of Central Europe (as well as for the others).

The first is the crisis of American leadership. It has been caused by the adoption of the highly ideological approach to American foreign policy, particularly during George W Bush's presidency. The end of the cold war and the obvious success of the American strategy of containment led some American politicians to the 'imperial delusions' and to the belief that the American overwhelming military power would allow the United States to subordinate the whole world to the American hegemony.[8] In early February 2001, I attended the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington at which the newly elected president delivered his first important speech on the aims of American foreign policy. President Bush argued that it was God's will to entrust the United States with the mission of promoting democracy all over the world and that he – as the president – considered his sacred duty to fulfil this mission. Rarely have I heard such clear declaration of the ideological nature of foreign policy. Soon after the terrorist attacks of September 2001, the United States (with support of the United Kingdom and some other states, including Poland) launched a war against Iraq. The Iraqi war turned out to become a major debacle for American position in the world. It was. To use the terminology of an American writer, 'a reckless response to terror'.[9] While militarily it was a fast success, politically it turned out to become a catastrophic defeat. Zbigniew Brzezinski has identified three main consequences of the war. First, it caused 'calamitous damage to America's global standing' and 'has discredited America's global leadership'. Second, it 'has been a geopolitical

[5] Shlomo Avineri, 'The Return to History. The Breakup of the Soviet Union', *The Brookings Review* 10, no 2 (1992), 30–33.

[6] Samuel P Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (University of Oklahoma Press – Norman, 1991), 293–294.

[7] Jerzy J Wiatr (ed.), *New Authoritarianism: Challenges to Democracy in the 21st Century* (Opladen–Berlin–Toronto: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2018).

[8] Carl Boggs, *Imperial Delusions: American Militarism and Endless War* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2005).

[9] Stephen Holmes, *The Matador's Cape: America's Reckless Response to Terror* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

disaster'. Third, 'it has increased the terrorist threat to the United States'.[10] It is mostly because of the Iraqi fiasco that Brzezinski called the Bush presidency 'catastrophic'. The arrogance of the Bush presidency has become the favourite target of criticism among American political writers.[11] In the aftermath of the war, the weakening of the American leadership undermined the trust of other nations in the effectiveness of the alliance with the United States and encouraged some other states to take a more assertive stand in international relations. Brzezinski's hope for a renewed American leadership were based on his expectation that the new president (to be elected in 2008) would be able to undo the consequences of the 'disastrous' policies of George W Bush. It is true that during the Obama presidency, the United States has not committed mistakes of such calibre as the Iraqi intervention, but it is also true that the new president was unable to overcome the long-term consequences of the policies of his predecessor. The election (in 2016) of Donald Trump opened a new period in American defence policy, marked by the high level of unpredictability.

The second factor, to some degree related to the first, is the growth of international terrorism. While not a new phenomenon, the terrorism of the present century became a qualitatively new factor in world politics. It is no longer limited to a single state (or region). It became truly international. Unlike the older version of terrorism, the present one does not concentrate on specific demands and aims at the total destruction of the West. It is motivated by religious fanaticism, which makes it particularly dangerous. No nation of the world can feel secure any more. Even the most aggressive policies directed against the terrorists have not been able to prevent the continuous repetition of terrorist acts.

It is largely because of the new strength of Muslim fanaticism that the democratic revolt against authoritarian regimes in the Arab countries failed to produce the fourth wave of democratisation. Consequences of the 'Arab Spring' of 2011 have been disappointing – contrary to the early assessments in the majority of Western media and academic circles – and have become the third factor in the worsening of political climate. With the exception of Tunisia, all Arab states affected by the upheavals either turned to renewed autocratic regimes (Egypt) or fell in the state of prolonged civil wars (Libya, Syria and Yemen). The civil war in Syria produced the emergence of the 'Islamic State', a terrorist stronghold for religious fanatics committed to the idea of the world caliphate. Because of support given to the two sides in the Syrian civil war, the United States and the Russian Federation find themselves in a precarious position with potentially dangerous consequences.

The fourth factor of the new international situation is the growing strength and assertiveness of the regional powers – China and Russia – challenging the world hegemony of the United States. The rapid growth of the economic and political strength of China came as a surprise to most of the experts on Chinese politics. Even Zbigniew Brzezinski,

[10] Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Second Chance: Three Presidents and the Crisis of American Superpower* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), 146–149.

[11] Robert C Byrd, *Losing America: Confronting Reckless and Arrogant Presidency* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2005); Dale R Herspring, *Rumsfeld's Wars: The Arrogance of Power* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2008).

who predicted the growth of China as a world power, had not expected that it would be able to match American economic power earlier than in the middle of the 21st century.[12] From the perspective of Central Europe, it is the new role of the Russian Federation that causes concern. Before trying to address the question of the Russian challenge, I should like to stress the fact that there has been a direct link between the failure of American foreign policy and the growing assertiveness of the Russian Federation. The weakening of the American power encouraged Russia to challenge the world hegemony of the United States, particularly in the regions close to Russia and considered Russia's 'close neighbourhood'.

Crucial for the security of Central Europe is the role of the Russian Federation as the strongest regional power in close vicinity of the eastern frontiers of the European Union. Is Russia a real threat to our security? Is she likely to provoke a new war, as predicted by the former deputy chief of NATO forces British General Richard Shirreff in his newly published political fiction?[13] In his fictitious scenario, Russia invades Latvia and is finally defeated by the combined efforts of NATO and local Latvian partisan forces but the conflict remains confined to the Baltic area and do not escalate to the level of the third world war.

Serious discussion of the Russian challenge requires an understanding of the political transformation of Russia after the fall of the Communist regime and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Internally, the post-Soviet period of Russian history has been marked by the chaotic years of Boris Yeltsin presidency, defined by Klaus von Beyme as 'anocracy' – a combination of autocracy and anarchy,[14] and by the neo-authoritarian rule of Vladimir Putin in the 21st century. The failure of democratic transformation had its roots both in the Russian political culture (including the heritage of the totalitarian dictatorship in the last century) and in the mistaken policy of the democratic West which refused to offer Russia badly needed economic assistance in the first years of its transition from Communist dictatorship. Putin's rule has been marked by successful efforts to restore Russia's position as great power. It is this aspect of his rule which, according to public opinion surveys, explains his strong popularity among Russian citizens.[15]

From the perspective of the Central European nations the crucial question is whether Russia of today constitutes a real danger to our security. I am convinced that she does not. In this, I oppose the dominant political narration in my own country. There are two main reasons for my position.

First, Russia is not an ideological power (like the former Soviet Union) and does not intend to export her political system and political philosophy to the rest of the world. Her national interest dictates the policy of regional hegemony within the geographically

[12] Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: America's Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1998).
[13] Richard Shirreff, *War with Russia. An Urgent Warning from Senior Military Command* (London: Hodder & Stoughton Ltd., 2016).
[14] Klaus von Beyme, *Transition to Democracy in Eastern Europe* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 166.
[15] Elena Shestopal, *New Trends in Russian Political Mentality* (Lanham: Lexington, 2016).

close vicinity of former Soviet republics and parts of Asia and Eastern Europe closest to the Russian borders but not in Central Europe, which has become part of the integrated transatlantic community.

Second, Russian leaders are well aware of the potentially disastrous consequences of attacking a member of NATO. Vladimir Putin is not an ideological fanatic but a pragmatic politician, carefully calculating his moves in world politics.[16] Only a lunatic would risk the war with NATO – the most powerful military alliance in world history.

Because of these two factors, I do not perceive Russia as a direct threat to the security of Central Europe. This does not mean, however, that conflicts with Russia can be excluded from our strategic thinking. It would be naïve to ignore the possibility of such conflicts, but it would also be wrong to exaggerate their impact on our security. Conflicts with Russia result from the competition over the future of those formerly Soviet republics which from the Russian point of view constitute the 'near abroad' of the Russian Federation and which are seen in the West as potential candidates for the extension of the economic and political structures of united Europe. Georgia in the Caucasus and Ukraine in Eastern Europe are the hottest point of such rivalry. Such conflicts, however, do not endanger the security of the Central European states, which are not and will not become parts of the potential Russian sphere of influence.

Recently, the Ukrainian crisis resulted in the deterioration of our relations with Russia not because of a direct danger to our security but because of the determination of the European Union to protect Ukrainian sovereignty endangered by the annexation of Crimea and by Russian-supported secession in the eastern provinces of Ukraine. To understand this conflict, one should go back to the precarious Russian–Ukrainian relations after the dissolution of the USSR. From the very beginning it was obvious that the ethnically Russian majority resented the incorporation of Crimea into Ukraine and wished its return to Russia.[17] Until the crisis of 2014, the Russian position on this issue was subordinated to the strategic consideration according to which close relations between two states were given preference to the interests and demands of the Crimean people. This has changed in early 2014, when the overthrown of the pro-Russian president Victor Yanukovich and the radical reorientation of Ukrainian foreign policy caused the Russian Government to abandon its cautious stand on the Crimean issue and to offer support (perhaps even encouragement) to the secessionists in the Donbas region. While NATO and the EU have had good reasons to offer political assistance to Ukraine and to oppose Russia on this particular issue, it would be a mistake to subordinate the totality of our relations with Russia to the resolution of the Ukrainian conflict. There are other important issues in which co-operation with the Russian Federation is vital for the security of Europe, including the solution to the civil war in Syria, the struggle against international terrorism and containing the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

[16] Alfred R Evans, *Power and Ideology: Vladimir Putin and the Russian Political System* (University of Pittsburgh – Center for the Russian and East European Studies, 2008).

[17] Anton Bebler, 'Crimea and the Ukrainian–Russian conflict', in *"Frozen conflicts" in Europe,* ed. by Anton Bebler (Opladen–Berlin–Toronto: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2015), 189–207.

Political realism tells us that conflicts between regional powers cannot be ruled out. In the world of today they result from national interests rather than from fundamentally hostile ideological commitments as it had been the case during the cold war. Conflicts of such nature should not, however, be seen as catastrophic. Moreover, I am convinced that the only way to the resolution of such conflicts (Ukrainian included) is through a compromise – not very likely in the nearest future, but inevitable in a longer perspective.

More difficult to deal with are two other challenges: international terrorism and the flow of refugees from the Middle East and North Africa. These two issues call for unity of the democratic states and for a serious rethinking of our global strategy.

International terrorism constitutes the most dangerous challenge to our security because by its very nature it makes compromise solutions impossible. Central Europe has not been targeted by international terrorists yet, but it would be a dangerous mistake to assume that this state of affairs will last forever. It is, therefore, imperative that we close ranks with our allies in Western Europe and in America to collectively stand up to this challenge. It is also essential that we seriously address the social and political roots of the problem, including the unresolved Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

European solidarity is also necessary for finding a realistic solution to the refugee issue. Unlimited admission of refugees from war-affected regions of the Middle East and Africa is not a realistic policy, because it inevitably would cause the continuous growth of the number of potential migrants. On the other hand, both from moral and from political reasons, it is wrong to wash our hands and to leave this issue exclusively to those states which have been directly affected by the influx of refugees. What is at issue is not only the fate of the refugees but the cohesion of the European Union.

What practical recommendations can we draw from this analysis? I should offer four suggestions.

First, maintain and strengthen the unity and solidarity of the community of democratic nations of Europe and North America. Stand up to all attempts to weaken the European integration and oppose the policies of national egoism and isolationism.

Second, follow the policy of compromise and avoid the temptation to impose our will on others. Keep in mind that compromise is not a capitulation. Avoid double-standards in evaluating policies of friends and adversaries.

Third, avoid subordination of our foreign policy to ideology, even if it would mean abandoning the dreams of a ‘crusade for democracy’. Keep in mind the dramatic consequences of the ideologically motivated war with Iraq as the crucial caveat for the future.

Fourth, deal realistically and collectively with the refugee problem and with international terrorism and be ready to undertake necessary burdens in solidarity with the rest of the community of democratic nations.

This will not make Central Europe immune from dangers which characterise the world of today. Security analysis is not a recipe for a utopia but an intellectual instrument for making our practical policies more effective.

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