ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY CONSIDERATIONS IN EASTERN EUROPE

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In recent years, more and more complex threats to security have emerged, highlighting the need for stronger and closer security cooperation at all levels. The crisis caused by virus SARS COV-2 brought to the forefront security in Europe, testing both the resilience once the infrastructure of critical complicated, and preparation for crisis situations and the means for managing them. Eastern Europe, plagued by various conflicts in recent decades, still faces many challenges today, such as uncontrolled population growth, declining living standards and climate change due to global warming. The latter will exacerbate the situation in the future. As environmental security is an emerging concern that cannot be addressed with traditional solutions, new ways of dealing with it need to be developed. Cooperation forms the core of such means, aiming an intersectoral approach and ensuring broad stakeholder participation in order to integrate the principle of sustainable development into national policies.

Keywords: security; military power; cooperation.

>"To secure peace is to prepare for war".
>*Carl von Clausewitz*

Since the beginning of Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014, the geopolitical and security situation in Eastern Europe and in Europe as a whole has changed. For more than seven years, it has not improved and even had a tendency to gradually worsen, which was demonstrated during the Russian-Belarusian military exercises "West-2017", respectively by the presence of significant Russian military forces on the border with Ukraine in 2021. A security vacuum has emerged after the collapse of the collective security system in Eastern Europe, despite continued efforts by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), European Union (EU), North-Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and even United Nations (UN). Accordingly, it was estimated that the main cause of the deteriorating security situation in the region was Russia's aggressive policy, correlated with the weakness shown by the main international organizations – the United Nations (UN), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe (CoE). NATO should play a key role in regional security in Eastern Europe in the forms of NATO's enlargement to the East, strengthening

NATO's role in the region and/or developing its special partnership with NATO. According to them, the EU should also play an active security role by strengthening sanctions against Russia, reducing dependence on Russian energy resources, assisting countries in the region in strengthening their national resilience and managing security challenges. There are thoughts for supporting the idea of establishing a new regional security format, but without Russia, under the EU/NATO umbrella. While responding to the question regarding the place and role of Ukraine in the security system in Eastern Europe, Ukraine is considered a security provider in Eastern Europe, a key component and a most important actor in the European security, a new Eastern European pillar of transatlantic security, an Eastern outpost against new challenges and threats with a key role in discouraging Russia's aggressive policy and demonstrating an alternative to Russia's development model for other post-soviet states. Ukraine is becoming an example and a source of experience in combating all types of hybrid warfare. Thus, the settlement of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict would contribute to strengthening regional security in Eastern Europe.

The outcome of any effort to create a new security architecture is therefore, of course, uncertain, but it should be tried nonetheless. Western leaders should follow this path confidently

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and without apology. If Russia refuses to negotiate or fails to live up to any agreement it may initially support, little will be lost and options will remain for a tightening of future policy against Russia[1]. Indeed, a number of such responses should be developed in advance, including the possibility of accelerating consideration of NATO membership for neutral states that are subsequently constrained or attacked by Russia. It would be preferable, of course, to avoid this. The current strategic situation involving most of the world's major economies and several of Europe's nuclear-weapon states is quite dangerous and will not become less dangerous if it is simply left on autopilot.

EU interests and objectives in Eastern European countries

The EU's core interest in its Eastern area is to be surrounded by a "ring of friends", as the President of the European Commission stated in 2002[2]. The following year, when it launched its neighborhood policy, the EU announced that resolving conflicts was one of its key priorities. Since then, there has been a significant increase in conflict in their vicinity – but there has been no parallel increase in the level of ambition of Member States to address this sensitive area. For the EU, the transition of post-soviet countries from communism to competitive democracy, rule of law administrations and functioning market economies will not only increase peace and stability, but also promote economic growth, sustainable development, inter-societal and cultural ties, and strong lasting relationships in its neighborhood.

While EU support for this transformation has yielded mixed results, the parties must recognize that a total failure of the process in its Eastern neighborhood is possible and would have serious consequences. Belarus can serve as a warning story of what can happen when a political and economic transformation fails. Now that Lukashenko is approaching old age and facing a rapid decline in his legitimacy due to the suppression of opposition protests, there are questions about the problems of succession, Belarusian sovereignty in the EU state and the sustainability of the country's economic model. At best, Belarus will remain a weak and poor country on the EU border. At worst, it will become a co-belligerent client state that Russia uses to directly threaten and challenge the EU's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Ukraine, Moldavia and Georgia could form an area of Moscow dominated instability – from which the Kremlin could organize clandestine subversion and conventional military operations. Without a territorial isolation comparable to that offered by the Mediterranean, this would pose a stronger threat to Eastern European states.

Such turmoil contradicts arguments in favor of "authoritarian stability". Even in separatist regions closely controlled by Russian intelligence services, local authorities are often provoked and sometimes stricken by public riots. In South Ossetia, protests against the 2012 elections ended with the death of the opposition candidate (who could have won that vote). In Abkhazia, the elected "president" was ousted twice – in 2014 and 2020, respectively – by popular uprisings sparked by allegedly rigged elections. Even if the EU put an end to support for political and economic transformation in its Eastern neighborhood, the popular desire for responsible government would not disappear, nor would the instability created by failed political processes.

The EU's main goal in its Eastern area is to create the "common space of common democracy, prosperity and stability"[3] which the European Council recently referred to. For some European leaders, political transformation is still a precondition for efforts to achieve other goals. Efforts to fight corruption, organized crime and money laundering in both the EU and its Eastern neighborhood have garnered some media attention following the Mueller Report and the scandal surrounding President Donald Trump's 2019 decision to dismiss the USA ambassador in Ukraine. Ultimately, the integrity and professionalism of local investigative and judicial authorities will be a key factor in whether the EU can achieve its goals in Eastern Europe.

EU objectives in Eastern Europe also cover issues such as labor mobility and migration, infrastructure, youth, education, ethnic minority groups, digitization steps towards aligning economic, health care, especially in relation to Covid-19 and equality of gender. However, these are rather apolitical bureaucratic portfolios, which show little about Europe's ability to implement its foreign policy. This is partly due to the fact that Belarus and Azerbaijan generally respect different political norms towards the EU, but are formally part of its Eastern neighborhood.

In terms of the EU's efforts to gain political influence over Eastern European decisions, energy ties with Russia are the only strategically important issue covered by the agreements between the parties. However, energy transit is an area that Moscow is using to put pressure on Eastern European states. In other words, energy disputes concern whether the EU can and should support Eastern European states in their transition to liberal democracy, an open society, the rule of law and free markets, or whether they should maintain close ties with Moscow.

EU support for political and economic transitions in the Eastern area has never been undisputed. Russia sees the instability, vulnerability, weakness and dependence of these countries as a key mechanism for exerting its influence in its immediate neighborhood. Russia has used economic dependencies – especially on oil and gas – to gain control of Georgia, Ukraine and Belarus. Moscow has also used targeted corruption, information warfare, election fraud and intelligence operations to discredit, extort or intimidate political actors in order to secure the power of those it believes will protect Russian interests. As if that was not enough in itself, Moscow also used military force to gain some advantages. Needless to say, the reforms related to the rule of law, free markets and the political system that the EU envisages for its neighborhood would reduce the vulnerability of Eastern European (Eastern Partnership) countries to pressure from Russia.

Russia's tactics, combined with the lack of constructive initiatives in the region, have earned it a reputation as a "strategic deflector"[4]. This label is particularly suitable in terms of covert operations, clandestine networks that are built in a country to weaken the institutional, political, economic and security organizations. The purpose of these operations is to make the country yield to foreign pressures or, if it does not trigger an "internal" conflict providing a pretext for an intervention.

Ukraine provides many examples of how Russia applies these tactics. Events during President Viktor Yanukovych showed that, the Kremlin has ample opportunity to use local strong men, oligarchs and public figures willing to help him achieve his goals. Centralization of power, capture of the state, systemic corruption and attacks on the independence of the press and the judiciary are attractive to local elites and powerful people trying to monopolize power. While there is a blurred line between domestic weakness and foreign-induced vulnerability, much of the success of undercover operations is based on exploiting pre-existing divisions in a country. In practical terms, this border does not matter for EU policy-making; it must mitigate the institutional weaknesses of the Eastern Partnership, regardless of their origin.

The EU has sometimes tried to negotiate transitional arrangements that would turn competition with Russia into a mutually beneficial situation. It has done so through direct involvement with Russia, providing economic and societal concessions and assistance for reform and modernization – as set out in the CFSP Joint Strategy. The parties also tried to negotiate peace agreements for protracted territorial conflicts, giving Russia a co-management position in the common security institutions, as stipulated in the 2010 Meseberg Memorandum. However, when they tried to implementing such initiatives, Russia and the EU have failed to create a common vision for the region. This is due to their profound ideological differences regarding the European security order. Instead of encouraging cooperation, these failed efforts have increased mutual suspicion.

The security environment in Eastern Europe

In order to address Russia's clandestine operations in Eastern European countries, a counter-subversion policy is needed that can protect their economic, financial, societal and political reforms. This requires not only a more active and coherent position on existing policy, but also an expansion of influence in five key areas:

- media and information activities;
- cyber security;
- security and information;
- defence;
- energy.

In the first area, European efforts have focused on supporting investigative journalists. This support came on a bilateral basis or through a coalition of countries with the same views, as seen in initiatives such as the Visegrad Fund. However important these measures were, they failed to achieve the intended effects. This is because the content they produce (most of which is available online) reaches only a small audience. As conventional television is still one of the most important sources of information for the citizens of Eastern European countries, it

is important that they address this environment directly. Establishing public television stations that are editorially and financially independent of the government through broadcasting fees is only the first step in this process. There is also a need for broader support in the form of advice, expertise, program content and quality control mechanisms.

The expansion of TV content must take into account the diversity of society. One model that has been particularly evident in Georgia and Moldavia is that Russian misinformation on TV targets ethnic and linguistic minorities. Without the ability to provide fact-finding services in the native languages of viewers, the state has abandoned these information bubbles. In Western countries, public service broadcasters are responsible for providing accurate and accessible information to minority ethnolinguistic groups. For strategic reasons, they should do the same in Eastern European countries.

While such impartial public services would provide more accurate content than oligarchs' television stations or foreign broadcast channels, they would not make these sources of misinformation disappear. However, changes in the regulatory framework could make it much more difficult to spread misinformation using the current business models of these outlets. First, the rules on media ownership, purchasing of the media, advertising and financing would make it more difficult for foreign powers or oligarchs to secretly acquire these assets. Second, the rules on the financial self-sufficiency of media companies would prohibit oligarchs from funding news agencies to manipulate public debate. They will force media companies to make a living from their own income, either through subscriptions or from third-party advertisements. It is unlikely that Eastern European states to adopt such legislation itself because TV propaganda is an important source of power and legitimacy of the ruling parties. Only pressure and conditionality can change this.

In Ukraine, several EU Member States support a variety of local NGOs that have developed considerable expertise in identifying and tracking Russian and local misinformation. However, the EU does not have the necessary structures to absorb the information generated by its local partners, to adapt its communication strategy accordingly and, more importantly, to help local actors improve their strategic communications to protect the political process of interference. Although there are capable local actors in Ukraine with whom the EU can work in the field of information security, there are few such actors in other Eastern European countries, as is especially evident in Georgia and Moldavia. The EU needs to launch capacity-building programs in this sector.

In parallel, *cyber operations* are an essential part of the undercover war of the 21st century. This can be seen in destabilizing efforts that involve everything from using data to assess citizens' moods and prejudices (and thus exploiting them through intelligence operations) to espionage, to sabotaging missions that paralyze government branches or strategic infrastructure. Improving cyber security and cyber resilience in Eastern European countries is needed to counter subversive action.

The EU has made slow progress in this area. However, it does not provide technical assistance to help Eastern countries implement their cyber defence system.

In order to improve their national cyber capacity, Eastern European countries need to partner with local IT companies. But in this respect, there are few such companies that governments can turn to, with the exception of Ukraine, which has a significant and rapidly growing IT sector. (Moldavia adopted a law to facilitate the growth of the sector in 2019, but it remains to be seen whether this is sustainable under the new government of the country.) Therefore, the countries of Eastern Europe are dependent on companies and IT services in the US, Europe, Russia and China. And the use of Russian and Chinese companies raises particularly acute concerns about cyber security.

Many of the measures that Eastern European countries need to take are first and foremost about internal cyber security and cyber sovereignty. They should create the legal framework and administrative structures to certify software and hardware programs; institutions to quickly coordinate national CERT teams through a "super CERT" across the country and set up cybercrime and forensic bodies. These structures could audit cyber security authorities and legislation, develop clear benchmarks and targets for organizational reforms, engage in capacity-building programs, provide critical information on emerging and imminent cyber threats, and liaise with local certificated authorities. They could also help

adopt EU standards for the implementation of 5G infrastructure in these countries. It is beyond the capacity of Eastern European states to conduct a full technical assessment of complex supply chains – networks not only for 5G, but also, inter alia, for government, military and intelligence communications. As a result, they need help from external stakeholders, such as EU joint cyber security research institutions.

Functional cyber security structures also have an important role to play in combating money laundering. The links between national banks and cyber intelligence units have proven important for detecting financial crimes. Foreign-influenced operations often rely on the same opaque and illegal financial channels to provide money for operational costs: sources of payment; corrupt individuals; funding frontal organizations (such as NGOs and the media) and the purchase of storage facilities, armaments and other assets to prepare for armed insurgencies. The types of covert operations described above are expensive business. Discontinuing financial support networks would be an effective way to combat them. Eventually, cyber security authorities and financial supervisors will prevent foreign secret operations only if local law enforcement agencies arrest the perpetrators, confiscate their assets and close illicit cover organizations.

All Eastern European states suffer from conflicts of interest between the powers of their investigative and law enforcement agencies, low public sector salaries (which increase the vulnerability of institutions to corruption), opaque procedural laws, complicated bureaucratic investigation procedures, full criminal codes gaps and contradictions, little or no institutional cooperation between law enforcement bodies, hierarchical, centralized structures, in which several high-ranking decision-makers can block or impede investigations in the whole branch of services and significant political control over investigative bodies. There have been few in-depth reforms of investigative and law enforcement agencies in Eastern European countries, and where such reforms did take place (as they did under Minister Vano Merabishvili of Georgia or General Attorney Ruslan Ryaboshapka of Ukraine), they were subjected to intense campaigns of obstruction and defamation by local business elites and established political forces.

Without intense pressure from abroad, not even minor reforms would have taken place.

In a challenged environment, such as Eastern European countries, *the information and security sectors* are essential. Without reliable and effective information Eastern states have no chance to resist Russia's destabilizing operations. By constantly monitoring the situation of threats, intelligence agencies play a central role both in informing decision-makers about hostile operations and in giving up law enforcement and financial security services for the investigation and prosecution of guilty persons and networks. The problem is that the internal intelligence services of Eastern European countries are either insecure because they are actually part of the political system (making them vulnerable to corruption and abuse for political and economic gain), or have only poorly developed capacities and capabilities.

The EU therefore needs to urgently support reform and develop capacity-building programs for Eastern countries in these areas. The EU should provide capacity-building programs, structural coordination on threats, technical assistance (especially in the field of cross-border signal intelligence) and military intelligence – in exchange for a thorough reform of intelligence and security services. Such a reform would entail increased democratic accountability, a reduction in the overlap between the powers and procedures of law enforcement agencies and provisions aimed at reducing corruption. In Ukraine, the European Union Advisory Mission (EUAM) proved of invaluable significance, being in touch with local services in relation to their needs and in assessing progress (and unfortunately regression) intelligence reform. Based on the experience of EUAM, the EU could appoint Tbilisi and Chisinau liaison offices. It should set up an information support and coordination cell in the Eastern neighborhood of Brussels, to coordinate assistance (as does the support group) and to facilitate practical exchanges of information. The EU could expand the EU's Common Information School, a PESCO project for children, beyond close cooperation between the Eastern Mediterranean states – to cover Eastern European countries where Russia has strategic interests. The school would then be suitable for training intelligence staff in Eastern European countries.

In addition, the EU needs to dramatically increase its intelligence capabilities in its Eastern neighborhood. Where necessary, the intelligence agencies of the Member States would have to compensate for the shortcomings of domestic intelligence services of the Eastern countries in particular counter-intelligence services.

This is especially important in situations of revolutionary change in which new administrative and other structures appear – something that is still a distinct possibility in all Eastern European countries. This situation gives Russia the opportunity to use front organizations to networks – and put allies in new structures and hamper efforts to reform from within. The EU has been too reactive in these scenarios, leaving it unable to effectively monitor the development of the situation and the people driving change. Of course, there is always a significant chance of error in a turbulent environment. But the EU's lack of adequate information hinders success. In the past, Eastern European countries have often offset this on the basis of US information.

Moscow sees undercover operations as the main way to destabilize governments and expand its influence. However, it also disturbs them in more open ways. As described above, Moscow uses open-ended threats to a country's territorial integrity and sovereignty to intimidate governments. Even without invading other countries, Russia sometimes uses a show of military force on the borders of neighboring countries to emphasize the dominance of its escalation and thus influence their decisions.

Some European diplomats believe that transforming Eastern European countries into non-aligned or neutral states would help stabilize the region. However, this would not happen automatically and Moscow is unlikely to observe such a misalignment. Indeed, misalignment would only be a viable option for Eastern countries if it strengthened its capacity *to defend itself against* external subversion.

There is an urgent need to reduce the vulnerability of Eastern European countries to the threat of forces such as those in Moldavia and the Russian army in Georgia and Ukraine. Of course, it is difficult to imagine a situation in which Eastern states would be immune to the military attacks of a large regional power that holds nuclear weapons like Russia. Like many non-aligned states during the Cold War, they should make military preparations to convince potential aggressors that military aggression would cost too much. Ukraine showed the value of this approach in 2015 and 2016. Russia theoretically maintained dominance of escalation in Ukraine, but any subsequent escalation would have required a much greater Russian effort, one for which the Kremlin would have needed justification from its own people. However, the case of Ukraine also showed that the issue of increasing the effectiveness of a country's armed forces is not only about equipment, but also about a comprehensive, long-term commitment to military and defence support.

Assistance in comprehensive defence planning is especially needed for Georgia and Moldavia. Because Moldavia is not directly bordered by Russia and separatist forces in Transnistria pose a different threat to conventional Russian military units, the Moldavian army must become a highly trained mobile force that coordinates well with the police to quickly counter hybrid threats. In contrast, Georgia is particularly vulnerable due to its geographical position, with considerable Russian military forces deployed on its territory and across the border. Georgia's defence policy has undergone a chaotic series of changes and restructuring, with its holistic concept of territorial defence (comparable to that of Sweden, Finland and the Baltic countries) still in the early stages of implementation. Because the Soviet army was never organized for territorial defence, the Eastern countries did not inherit any tradition of thinking in this area.

Last but not least, the EU faces challenges related to the *energy security* of Eastern European countries. In an ideal world, energy transit would allow for constructive cooperation between Russia, the West and Eastern European states: Russia depends on cheap and secure facilities for exports to Europe, Europe needs reliable energy sources (both oil and gas) and Eastern European countries want to earn transit fees by connecting the two. But due to the gas transit crisis through Ukraine that erupted in 2006 and 2009, as well as fears that some Member States' high dependence on Russian gas, oil and electricity makes them vulnerable to blackmail, the EU has begun to implement a common energy policy. In general, the policy is designed to create a

transparent, interconnected and competitive internal energy market, which breaks the monopolies of certain energy companies and diversifies supply. The legal framework of this energy policy turned into foreign policy because neighboring countries may join EU energy community by adapting rules and governance structure on their energy markets. Inclusion in a wider EU market should lower the cost of energy for Eastern European countries (some of which currently have to pay among the highest prices for natural gas in Europe) and should significantly strengthen their efforts in the negotiations on energy purchases.

Some progress has been made in this area: Georgia is now much better connected to neighboring countries and has diversified its offer, Ukraine has implemented painful reforms to the internal energy market and pricing regulations, while breaking monopolies and eliminating corruption schemes that have proven to be a major political responsibility. However, Moldova's attempts to connect with the Romanian gas market were interrupted when a pro-Russian government came to power in November 2019.

However, in the coming years, the bigger issue with energy transport will be whether Eastern European countries will play a role in energy transfer or whether Russia will be able to bypass the region as a whole by completing the TurkStream and North Stream 2 pipeline networks. Eastern European countries fear that if they do not need other post-Soviet states (especially Belarus and Ukraine) for energy transit, Russia will be released from a major constraint on its attempts to intimidate them, including by using military force. Last year, Russia and Ukraine avoided a confrontation over the latter's role in gas transit only at the last minute, reaching an agreement that lasts until 2024 and sets a minimum level of annual gas transit to maintain energy infrastructure in Ukraine.

While the EU brokered negotiations as a broker, the US was the real facilitator of the agreement. Pending US sanctions on new Russian gas pipelines (which mainly target Nord Stream 2 but may also complicate the maintenance of TurkStream), it was risky for Russia to bypass Eastern Europe altogether. Given that there was a growing consensus in Washington on the need for such sanctions and that Germany had little EU support for Nord Stream 2, Russian President Vladimir Putin had to protect himself against possible future developments. Maintaining a minimum gas transit role for Ukraine was part of this coverage process. Therefore, Russia has postponed its final decision on the transit issue – and the dispute is likely to continue for some time.

Conclusions

It is not an easy task to change the blockade through mutual support on strategic issues at the level of Eastern European countries. However, Member States may begin to do so by recognizing that some of them have special experience and expertise in dealing with various EU partners. Eastern European Member States should generally trust France, Italy and Spain in matters involving the Mediterranean, Iran or the Middle East peace process, and France, Italy and Spain should pay attention to Eastern European countries in anticipation of Russian movements and interests, as well as in relations with Eastern European countries. Eastern European states should consult Brussels in advance on planned movements and policies related to strategic sovereignty, in order to relieve them of unpleasant surprises.

Member States need to expand their portfolio in key areas, as they have done throughout the history of its existence. France and other Mediterranean countries should agree to increase EU resources and operations in Eastern European countries; instead, they should make a greater contribution to French missions in Africa, maritime security operations in the Mediterranean and other initiatives. However, it should fall as a defence of the status quo's legal European security order.

The role of the European Commission should be strengthened in order to avoid protracted bilateral disputes between EU Member States. For example, if Germany had allowed the European Commission to take responsibility for negotiating and launching new pipeline projects, other Member States may now be more willing to help such initiatives withstand external pressures.

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