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RUSSIAN WAR AGAINST UKRAINE: A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY FOR THE CEE AND BALTIC REGION?

Sergiy Gerasymchuk

Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism"

The Russian war against Ukraine and full-scale invasion that started on 24th February 2022 is both a challenge and an opportunity for the CEE and the Baltic States. It has triggered global attention in the region, enhanced the regional actors' solidarity with Ukraine and may eventually boost the regional initiatives, e.g. Three Seas Initiative or the Bucharest Nine. Also, it may inspire the creation of brand-new alliances. Nevertheless, the role of NATO and the EU is crucial in the region and their gravity remains decisive for the viability of the regional formats.

The region of Central and Eastern Europe (alongside the Baltic States) has often been called the site of geopolitical competition between the great powers. Indeed, the region's geographical location often made it a place of wars and rivalry where the international actors projected their influence. The long period under Soviet domination undermined the region's independence. Basically, the countries of the region were Moscow's satellites and served as Soviet proxies at the international level, whereas any kind of opposition was suppressed by the repressive Communist machine.

Further, after the end of the Cold War, in their search for security and economic stability and in order to escape from Russian revanchism, most of these countries joined NATO and the EU. The accession process was accelerated by the regional cooperation and joint efforts of like-minded countries in the region. The Visegrad Group (V4) – an alliance of four Central and Eastern European countries: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia launched in 1991 – allowed its members to get a

stronger voice in Brussels and Washington, to promote their European integration choice and to highlight regional interests on the European agenda. The Nordic-Baltic 8 Format (NB8), which includes Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Sweden came together in 1992 and formalized the historical ties between the Baltic States that re-gained their independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union and their northern neighbours, who were already members of the EU and/or NATO. Nowadays the group serves as a platform for Nordic-Baltic cooperation.

Despite being under the EU's normative and economic aegis, and NATO's security gravity, in addition to the influence of the countries which play leading roles in these organisations, and benefitting from the privileged relations that come with membership of both the European Union and North Atlantic alliance, the countries of the region still preserved their existing regional cooperation with the V4 and NB8, and they have also launched new ones. For example, in 2008 the EU launched the Eastern Partnership, which included Armenia,

Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. The second example is China-CEE (China-CEEC), also known as 16+1, which in 2012 was created as a framework for cooperation between China and 16 countries of the region: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, The Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Slovenia (Lithuania withdrew from the group in 2021). These initiatives were aimed at ensuring the interests of their members vis-a-vis stronger partners. In some cases, like in the case of the EaP, it was a success¹. In some other cases, like in the case of the CEEC, it did not work properly².



Despite being under the EU's normative and economic aegis, and NATO's security gravity, in addition to the influence of the countries which play leading roles in these organisations, and benefitting from the privileged relations that come with membership of both the European Union and North Atlantic alliance, the countries of the region still preserved their existing regional cooperation

Also, at the risk of being blamed for drawing up division lines in the EU and NATO, the countries of the region initiated internally oriented formats, which demonstrate high

potential for success. The EU-centred Three Seas Initiative (3SI), launched in 2015, is composed of the EU member states located between the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic seas – Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, The Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Austria, Croatia, Romania, and Bulgaria. It aims to promote cooperation, first and foremost, for the development of infrastructure in the energy, transport, and digital sectors.³ It targets new investments, economic growth, and energy security. The EU was initially suspicious of the Three Seas Initiative. The so-called “old Europe” perceived it as a rival project within the organisation that may undermine the EU's unity. Poland in this regard was often perceived as a key trouble-maker, willing to use regional leadership as a tool to argue with Brussels regarding the implementation of the European norms and standards. Although initially perceived of with caution by the EU and Germany, 3SI summits now host the representatives of Germany and the EU as observers, and prioritise projects aimed at connecting the South and North of Europe. The 3SI leadership managed to persuade their European counterparts that the existence of the Initiative provides the EU with added value, since it not only aims to implement connections prioritised by the EU North-West, but also seeks alternative funding (including from private sources)⁴.

No less important is the Bucharest Nine Initiative (B9) – a security formation of nine of NATO's Eastern flank member-states. These include Bulgaria, The Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland,

- 1 *The EU Eastern Partnership has been a success*, “Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Sweden”, 13 May 2019 [<https://www.government.se/opinion-pieces/2019/05/the-eu-eastern-partnership-has-been-a-success/>]
- 2 L. Poggetti, J. Weidenfeld, *China seems to tone down its 16+1 engagement: three possible explanations*, “Mercator Institute for China Studies”, 14 March 2018 [<https://merics.org/en/analysis/china-seems-tone-down-its-161-engagement-three-possible-explanations>]
- 3 *The Objectives of the Three Seas Initiative in 2022*, “The Three Seas Initiative” [<https://3seas.eu/about/objectives/>]
- 4 E.Kasprzyk, K. Mikulsk, *Growing stronger together. Increasing the Three Seas' connectivity*, “Paving the Digital Path in Central and Eastern Europe”, 2021, [<https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Paving-the-Digital-Path-in-CEE-report.pdf>]

Romania, and Slovakia. Launched in November 2015 in Bucharest (Romania), upon the initiative of Romania and Poland, its members were brought together by the common geopolitical burden of being part of the “Soviet bloc”, i.e. the Warsaw Pact, the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance and the Soviet Union. Their common burden now is the fear of threats coming from “Russki Mir”, regardless of NATO membership, the expansion of Russia’s political control and domination, and its policy of imperial revanchism, which reached its high point on 24th February 2022 with Russia’s full-scale unprovoked invasion of Ukraine.

Since the majority of the 3SI countries also belong to B9, synergy between the initiatives is highly likely, and the North-South connection routes may eventually serve for security purposes: both in terms of economic, energy, and digital security and for ensuring North-South logistical chains for NATO-led operations⁵.

Russia – the Troublemaker for the Region

The Russian invasion, on the one hand, became a challenge for most of the countries neighbouring Ukraine. The full-scale war in their direct neighbourhood fuelled by Russia’s ambition not to limit itself to Ukraine is perceived as a direct military threat by the countries of the CEE and the Baltic States. Such perception is being cemented by Putin’s statements on his historical mission “to return (what is Russia’s) and strengthen (the country)”⁶ and the dubious initiatives of the State Duma e.g. a draft bill that calls

for repealing the Decree of the State Council of the USSR “On the Recognition of the Independence of the Republic of Lithuania”.⁷ The economic consequences of the Russian war against Ukraine have already had a negative impact on regional and global economics, and the situation may further deteriorate. Russia’s attempts to undermine solidarity in the EU and NATO puts in question the cohesion and sustainability of both blocks, and indeed may create division lines between the countries that strive to deter Russia and those which are still influenced by Russian propaganda and Putinverstehers (which literally translates as «Putin understander» politicians, analysts and businessmen who try to understand Putin and to justify his policies).



The Russian invasion, on the one hand, became a challenge for most of the countries neighbouring Ukraine. The full-scale war in their direct neighbourhood fuelled by Russia’s ambition not to limit itself to Ukraine is perceived as a direct military threat by the countries of the CEE and the Baltic States

However, at the same time, the countries of the region have also gained momentum.

First, Central and Eastern Europe became “Central” indeed. Now the region is at the centre of the attention of the whole world. The problems often voiced by the

5 V. Kornis, *Poland’s Perspective on the Three-Seas-Initiative*, “Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom”, 25 April 2022 [<https://www.freiheit.org/central-europe-and-baltic-states/polands-perspective-three-seas-initiative/>]

6 *Hailing Peter the Great, Putin draws parallel with mission to ‘return’ Russian lands*, “Reuters”, 10 June 2022 [<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/hailing-peter-great-putin-draws-parallel-with-mission-return-russian-lands-2022-06-09/>]

7 G. Peseckyte, *Russian Duma questions Lithuania’s independence*, “Euractiv”, 09 June 2022 [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/russian-duma-questions-lithuanias-independence/]

leaderships of these countries are now being discussed at the level of the G7, UN, and other international institutions and forums, and what is even more important are being taken seriously. The narrative of blaming the region's leaders for unjustified Russophobia is fading away. The window of opportunity for frank discussion and sober assessment of Russian behaviour is open.

Second, the unprovoked Russian aggression provided explicit evidence of the malign Russian influence on the EU member-states and its immediate neighbourhood, and is now being deterred not only at the national level but also on the EU level. The efforts to tackle Russian hybrid warfare, which were previously undertaken separately by countries in the region are now coordinated at the EU level and supported by the EU's tools. NATO has also intensified efforts to counter disinformation, following clear direction from the Allied Heads of State and Government in the 2018 Brussels Summit Declaration⁸ and in the 2019 London Declaration⁹.

The European Union has already limited the inflow of Russian propaganda.¹⁰ European countries continue to shut down Russian propaganda channels and take other measures against them. The European Platform of Regulatory Authorities (EPRA) coordinates information related to the measures taken by the European National Regulatory Authorities. The EU has imposed

sanctions on state media RT/Russia Today and Sputnik in the EU.¹¹ Sputnik and RT/Russia Today (RT English, RT UK, RT Germany, RT France and RT Spanish) have been suspended from broadcasting in the EU.

Third, the agreement between the European Parliament and the member states on the Directive on measures for a high common level of cybersecurity across the Union (NIS 2 Directive) paves the way for enhanced cyber defence. The need for that enhancement is clear in particular in the Baltic States, The Czech Republic, Hungary, and Romania which were recently massively attacked by Russian hackers.



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On top of it all, at least 394 officials in Russia's diplomatic missions have been expelled by Western countries since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.¹² That is one of the largest collective expulsions of Russian diplomats in modern history. The only similar precedent also related to Russia was in 2018, after Russia poisoned

8 *Brussels Summit Declaration*, "North Atlantic Treaty Organization", 11 July 2018 [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_156624.htm]

9 *London Declaration*, "North Atlantic Treaty Organization", 04 December 2019 [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_171584.htm]

10 *Europe ceases Russian propaganda – list of countries*, "National Council of Television and Radio Broadcasting of Ukraine", 10 March 2022 [<https://www.nrada.gov.ua/en/europe-ceases-russian-propaganda-list-of-countries-infographics>]

11 *EU imposes sanctions on state-owned outlets RT/Russia Today and Sputnik's broadcasting in the EU*, "Council of the EU", 02 March 2022 [<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/02/eu-imposes-sanctions-on-state-owned-outlets-rt-russia-today-and-sputnik-s-broadcasting-in-the-eu>]

12 R. Gramer, M. Yang, *West Boots Out Hundreds of Russian Diplomats in Wake of Ukraine Invasion and War Crimes*, "Foreign Policy", 07 April 2022 [<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/07/us-europe-russian-diplomats-ukraine>]

Sergey Skrypal – a former Russian military intelligence officer – using a chemical weapon on British territory. The expulsion of Russian diplomats also limited their malign influence on the national governments. The investigations following the expulsion were helpful for finding out the sources of leaks of classified information.¹³



Solidarity between the CEE and Baltic States and Ukraine, with a high level of support, including military support, has not only resulted in closer relations between Kyiv and these states (with probably one exception - Hungary) but also made the voices of these countries stronger

The Russian war against Ukraine also explicitly proved that Russia has already weaponised its gas supplies. And if earlier the EU and its leading countries were reluctant to accept this, and blamed the CEE states and Ukraine for exaggerating this threat, now the EU is fully aware of the risks, and is moving ahead with a green transition and seeking alternative supply routes. The CEE states are the pioneers in this regard. The Baltic States, Poland, and Bulgaria have already terminated their contracts with Russian Gazprom. The case of Bulgaria proves that it is not an unbearable burden for the national economy.¹⁴ With the assistance of the US and Azerbaijan, the country has gained access to alternative LNG and pipeline supplies.

Also, the new solidarity and the accelerated launching of the interconnectors played their role in assuring resilience in facing up to Russian pressure in the energy domain. Gas Interconnection Poland–Lithuania (GIPL) was commissioned and started commercial operations on 1st May, 2022. The gas connection between Bulgaria and Greece will start operating on 1st July, 2022. This long-awaited launching became possible after the Bulgarian and Greek energy regulators took a joint decision to license the gas connection operator – ICGB.

The news from Romania may also have an impact on developments in the energy security domain of the region. Romanian gas transmission systems operator Transgaz has signed a roadmap agreement with the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund (3SIIF) for the development of greenfield gas infrastructure projects in the country¹⁵. Given Romania's extensive domestic oil and gas reserves, further investment in gas transmission infrastructure is anticipated to drive economic development in the region, while also supporting European energy security and the energy transition in the Three Seas region.

Solidarity between the CEE and Baltic States and Ukraine, with a high level of support, including military support, has not only resulted in closer relations between Kyiv and these states (with probably one exception – Hungary) but also made the voices of these countries stronger. While previously their support for Ukraine was often perceived as unjustified and irrational sentiment,

13 K. Nikolov, *Bulgarian ex-general accused of spying for Russia*, "Euractiv", 03 March 2022 [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/bulgarian-ex-general-accused-of-spying-for-russia]

14 T. Wesolowsky, *Despite Doomsday Predictions, Bulgaria Proves There Is Life After Russian Gas*, "Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty", 20 May 2022 [https://www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-life-after-russian-gas/31860510.html]

15 *Romania's Transgaz, 3SIIF agree to invest in new local gas infrastructure projects*, "Globuc", 26 May 2022 [https://globuc.com/news/romania-transgaz-3siif-agree-to-invest-in-new-local-gas-infrastructure-projects/]

nowadays for the EU it is getting clear that such support is a necessary precondition for stabilising the region, and the way to deter further Russian aggression. Moreover, the emerging security cooperation of the countries of the region creates a pretext for shaping a sort of defence alliance that has the potential to strengthen NATO in the region and beyond the borders of the alliance. Moreover, the decision of Finland and Sweden to ensure their future security by joining NATO may also be followed by their desire to join 3SI, which will even further strengthen the Initiative economically and militarily.

Besides, even small countries like Estonia or Lithuania now not only serve as moral compasses for the more influential EU members, but also the voices of their leaders gain more attention and have higher chances of becoming mainstream. For example, extremely vocal statements from the leadership of Poland, the Baltic States, The Czech Republic and Slovakia, as well as their commitment to assisting Ukraine, alongside the pressure of European public opinion, are pushing the Western elites to further deter and sanction Russia and to shape the Eastern agenda of the EU.

A Window of Opportunity and Driver for Regional Initiatives

All the above circumstances open another window of opportunity. There is a clear need for security, energy cooperation, the creation of new sustainable logistical chains needed for the supply of energy resources, and ensuring Ukrainian exports and imports may eventually boost the existing regional initiatives. Both B9 and 3SI are well equipped for these tasks and have enough expertise, enhanced by cooperation with Ukraine.

Moreover, the important role of Ukraine as a contributor to security, and as the country that may eventually be an important participant in regional projects clearly points out that it should gain the status of a partner if not a full member of the mentioned initiatives. An additional argument in this regard is the fact that Ukraine will need lots of investment for reconstruction and adaptation to post-war reality, and the 3SI and B9 may serve as hubs for the reconstruction projects, to connect Ukraine to the security cooperation frameworks existing within these initiatives and supported not only by the EU and NATO but also by such players external to the region as the US and Japan, which are expressing a growing interest in the region.

Such a need is already realised by Ukraine's partners who already advocate Ukraine's membership of 3SI.¹⁶ For example, this fact was explicitly pointed out by the President of Estonia Alar Karis, who has already proposed to create a new regional infrastructure on the basis of the 3SI, aimed at ensuring European energy security and grain exports from Ukraine. He discussed this issue with the President of Poland Andrzej Duda and President of Latvia Egils Levits on the margins of the Davos summit in May 2022 and said that the upcoming Riga summit of the 3SI may give an additional impetus to the infrastructure projects of the Initiative, considering the changes in the security situation in the Adriatic, Baltic, and the Black Sea.

Certainly, the growing role of the CEE and full-fledged inclusion of Ukraine into that space by means of closer cooperation with both NATO and the EU, in addition to membership in the formats of regional cooperation depend on numerous variables. The impact

¹⁶ *Estonian president stresses importance of energy connections for European security*, "The Baltic Times", 25 May 2022 [https://www.baltictimes.com/estonian_president_stresses_importance_of_energy_connections_for_european_security]

of Ukraine's ability to deter Russia is crucial and the large scale, operational capacities of the Ukrainian Armed Forces depend not only on Ukraine itself and its neighbours but also on the support of the EU, NATO, the US and the UK.



it inspired the leaders of the countries of the region to seek additional opportunities and actors who can be constructively engaged in regional affairs, and to promote the regional agenda on the global level

Besides, granting Ukraine candidate status in relation to the EU is decisive. Not only will it reflect the new reality and formally recognise Ukraine as part of the European community, but also will open the way both for investments to rebuild Ukraine and to encourage even closer relations with the neighbouring EU states.

The EU's and NATO's failure to deliver and meet the expectations of Kyiv and the neighbouring CEE states may open the gate to other scenarios. Disappointment, a deficit of trust, and fear of being betrayed by the allies may eventually push the CEE and the Baltic States, as well as Ukraine, into searching for alternative formats of cooperation, and to rely on the other actors who may contribute to the security and stability of the region (be it the US, the UK or other actors powerful enough to deter Russia). There are a few formats of that type already sketched out: the alliance of Ukraine, Poland, and the UK, the Lublin Triangle, or the so-called European Commonwealth –

the recent initiative allegedly voiced by the British leadership¹⁷. The potential for such initiatives will be lower in comparison to the EU's or NATO's, and they will thirst for investments and they lack European normative power. But anyway, their existence and operationality will serve as a plan B in case of the inefficiency of the existing security and cooperation formats or the failure to provide adequate support to the region in the event of further Russian aggression (by applying article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, Article 42.7 of the Treaty on European Union or Article 222 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU). Moreover, trust among the participating parties will to some extent compensate for other weaknesses of the abovementioned blocks and initiatives.

If both the EU and NATO and the regional initiatives fail to deter Russia, and Ukraine is left alone in its existential war, this will pave the way for the scenario cherished by the Kremlin. Russian expansionism will be enhanced and the regional initiatives, as well as the small states, will be doomed.

Conclusions

The Russian war against Ukraine and the full-scale invasion that started on 24th February 2022 became a crash test for the CEE and Baltic States. The war is an existential threat not only to Ukraine but also to its neighbouring states. They are in a preferential position due to NATO and EU membership, but bearing in mind Russian revanchism and expansionism, this would not necessarily protect them from attacks, if not directly then by hybrid means. The threat has accelerated the processes of regional cooperation, which do not substitute but rather supplement cooperation with NATO and the EU.

17 UK proposes "European Commonwealth" with Poland, Ukraine, and Baltics, "Kafkasesk", 30 May 2022
[<https://kafkadesk.org/2022/05/30/uk-proposes-european-commonwealth-with-poland-ukraine-and-baltics>]

Also, it inspired the leaders of the countries of the region to seek additional opportunities and actors who can be constructively engaged in regional affairs, and to promote the regional agenda on the global level by means of groups and initiatives like 3SI and B9. Simultaneously, they support Ukraine and also seek the chance to engage it in the EU and NATO, as well as in the existing regional initiatives.

If successful, that will further strengthen the region and make it more visible not only on the regional but also on the global scale. It will also provide regional organisations and groups of countries with the opportunity to become hubs for supporting and reconstructing Ukraine.

If Ukraine does not receive enough Western support: be it weapons, ammunition, financial support, or the status of candidate for EU accession, the chance given not only

to Ukraine but to the whole region of the CEE and the Baltic States will be wasted. To some extent, the emerging initiatives may help to preserve local cooperation and regional projects, but only the security gravity of NATO and the normative and economic power of the EU, strengthened by enhanced solidarity may drive Central and Eastern Europe forward, and propel the development of the region to which Ukraine naturally belongs.

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