

**Ukrainian
Central
European
Forum**

Position Paper

FIGHT FOR DEMOCRACY & PROSPERITY

Once Again for Central Europe

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The Russian full-scale attack on Ukraine became a crush-test for the numerous forecasts, theories and concepts that were aiming at explaining regional context, driving forces of reforms within the region as well as regional identity attributes. People-to-people contacts, solidarity and common values, common perception of threats and resilience became more than theoretical constructs and were approbated on ground.

The recent developments and the war-time realities proved the assumptions of Milan Kundera coined in his essay "The Tragedy of Central Europe"¹ published in 1984. Although he was not focusing on Ukraine at that time belonging to the Soviet Union but rather on the region of Central Europe per se, nowadays it is getting clear that his thoughts refer to the whole community of nations once directly or indirectly attacked by Russia and injured by Russian chauvinism and imperialism.

Kundera referred to the great Hungarian revolt in 1956 and the bloody massacre that followed; the Prague Spring and the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968; the Polish revolts of 1956, 1968, 1970, and concluded that in dramatic content and historical impact, nothing that has occurred in "geographic Europe," in the West or the East, can be compared with the succession of revolts in Central Europe. Every single one was supported by almost the entire population. And, in every case, each regime could not have defended itself for more than three hours if it had not been backed by Russia.

In Ukraine the Orange Revolution in 2004, Euromaidan and the Revolution of Dignity in 2013-2014 succeeded notwithstanding the support Moscow provided to pro-Russian forces and that caused further evolution of Russian methods of influence. The failure to impose its rules by means of proxies inspired Russian leadership to go further and to occupy the territory of Ukraine whereas all those opposing Russian domination became subjects to termination. Bearing in mind the methods applied it can be described as an attempt of genocide – deliberate killing of a large number of people from a

¹ http://www.kx.hu/kepek/iszes/anyagok/Kundera_tragedy_of_Central_Europe.pdf

particular nation or ethnic group with the aim of destroying that nation or group.

While Western partners and Central European neighbors supported Ukraine in its democratic path Russia by supporting pro-Russian politicians and groups tried to keep Ukraine within the orbit of Russian imperialism supported by revolutionary expansionism methods and genocide attempts which became the pillars of the rebranded “russkiy mir” (Russian world) concept.

Referring to František Palacký, Kundera in his iconic essay reminded that Palacky had warned of Russia's imperial ambitions; “it aspired to become a “universal monarchy,” which means it sought world domination. “A Russian universal monarchy,” Palacky wrote, “would be an immense and indescribable disaster, an immeasurable and limitless disaster.” The ongoing attempts to impose “russkiy mir” are no less disastrous since Russian primarily goals haven't changed much, Russian potential was enriched with the technologies and investments generously provided by the West at the end of the Cold war and Russian impunity was assured by lobby groups in the Western countries. These facts accompanied with the constant and blatant violations of the international law, occupation and attempts of annexation of Ukrainian territories, terrorist attacks on civilians and critical infrastructure of Ukraine cause an existential threat not only to Ukrainians but also to other regions far beyond Russia's close neighborhood.

The missionary vision of Vladimir Putin who back in May 2022 claimed that “Russia is not just a state, it is indeed a separate civilization: a multi-ethnic country with a huge variety of traditions, cultures and denominations”² corresponds with Kundera's assumption that “Russia is seen not just as one more European power but as a singular civilization, an other civilization” as well as with the fact that while Central Europe, “ought to be a family of equal nations, each of which—treating the others with mutual respect”, “a small arch-European Europe, a reduced model of Europe made up of nations conceived according to one rule: the greatest variety within the smallest space”, Russian civilization to the contrary was founded on the opposite principle: the smallest variety within the greatest space. Russia was and still is aiming at uniforming, standardizing, centralizing, and is determined to transform every nation of its empire into a single Russian people – “rossiyane” notwithstanding the place where they live.

² <https://www.rbc.ru/society/17/05/2020/5ec1334d9a79478470930e9f>

The relative weakness of Russia after the collapse of the USSR gave a region another chance for uniting the efforts. While Russia was adapting for the new reality, Baltic states and most of the Central European countries joined NATO and the EU. Arguably, both institutions with the highlighted respect to human rights and equality of the member states were perceived by the Central Europeans as a frame for regional cooperation that will ensure the essential variety under the umbrella of the security and economic unity. The tragedy of Ukraine in this regard was lack of political will, often propelled by Russian malign influence, to use the window of opportunity before the Western European and NATO's appetite for enlargement decreased.

While Ukraine was left on the margins of the integration processes the accession path of Central European and Baltic states was accelerated by the regional cooperation and joint efforts of the like-minded countries of the region. The Visegrád Group (V4), the Nordic-Baltic 8 Format (NB8), the EU-centered Three Seas Initiative (3SI) which is often perceived as reincarnation of the Intermarium and the Bucharest Nine format further ensure variety accompanied by solidarity which is one of the strongest sides of the region. The common burden of rabid "russkiy mir", better understanding of the threats coming from Russia and necessity to support each other are a matter of survival for both Ukraine and its Central European neighbours.

Russia continues sending the signals that strengthen the feeling of uncertainty and anxiety. Putin claims "to return (what is Russia's) and strengthen (the country)".³ In this regard neither Ukraine, nor other CEE states feel safe and still face the risk of being assimilated into a larger Russian horde or extinct.

However, at the same time, the countries of the region also gain their momentum.

First, the problems voiced by the leadership of Central and Eastern Europe countries and often perceived as exaggeration of the Russia-related fears and overestimation of Russian assertiveness now are being discussed at the level of the G7, G20, the UN, and other international institutions and forums, and what's even more important are being taken seriously. The President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen rightly noted: "One lesson from this war is we should have listened to those who know Putin. To Anna Politkovskaya and all the Russian journalists who exposed the crimes, and paid the ultimate price. To our friends in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and to

³ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/hailing-peter-great-putin-draws-parallel-with-mission-return-russian-lands-2022-06-09/>

the opposition in Belarus. We should have listened to the voices inside our Union – in Poland, in the Baltics, and all across Central and Eastern Europe. They have been telling us for years that Putin would not stop.”⁴

Second, Russian aggression in Ukraine and supplementary hybrid operations shed the light on the Russian malign influence on the CEE and Baltic States but also in the other EU member-states and caused hybrid threat to the whole bloc. This evidence increased the synergy between the Eastern flank countries and the EU institutions. The efforts to tackle Russian hybrid warfare, which were previously undertaken at the national level now are coordinated at the EU level and supported with the EU’s tools. NATO also has intensified efforts to deter Russia in line with the 2018 Brussels Summit Declaration⁵, 2019 London Declaration⁶ and Madrid Summit Declaration⁷.

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.⁸

The Russian attack on Ukraine followed by the gas blackmailing and problems with the Nord Stream 2 has also explicitly proved that Russia has weaponized its gas supplies and the EU finally started to take a problem seriously and to seek for the feasible solutions including completely weaning itself off Russian energy by 2030.

Besides, a window of opportunities for the closer Ukraine’s ties with CEE is open. Ukraine has demonstrated that now there is a strong political will and consensus regarding the necessity to join the EU and NATO. The CEE and Baltic States advocated Ukrainian choice and the progress already achieved by Ukraine since signing Association Agreement back in 2014 and empathy of the European community towards Ukraine. On 23 June 2022, the European Council granted candidate status to Ukraine. On 30 September 2022 right after the Putin’s decision on further annexation of the Ukrainian territories Ukraine went even further and applied to join NATO. President

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/ov/speech_22_5493

⁵ https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_156624.htm

⁶ https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_171584.htm

⁷ https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_196951.htm

⁸ https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/bulgarian-ex-general-accused-of-spying-for-russia/

Volodymyr Zelenskyi announced the accelerated bid saying Ukraine has already made its “path towards NATO,” demonstrating “compatibility with the alliance’s standards”.⁹

The Presidents of Central and Eastern Europe issued a statement which says they reiterate their support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, do not recognize and will never recognize Russian attempts to annex any Ukrainian territory, firmly stand behind the 2008 Bucharest NATO Summit decision concerning Ukraine’s future membership, support Ukraine in its defence against Russia’s invasion, demand Russia to immediately withdraw from all the occupied territories and encourage all Allies to substantially increase their military aid to Ukraine.¹⁰ The statement was supported by the Presidents of the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania and Slovak Republic.

The chances for crystallizing regionally driven initiatives are growing. The clear need for security, energy cooperation, creation of new sustainable logistical chains needed for the supply of energy resources, and ensuring Ukrainian exports and imports may boost the existing regional initiatives whereas the initiatives like Ukrainian Central European Forum may serve as the platform for the respective discussion and for designing creative decisions for the region.

Finally, the important role of Ukraine as a security contributor clearly justifies gaining of the status of a partner if not the member of the aforementioned regional initiatives and founder of the new ones that will play an essential role in reconstruction and adaptation to post-war reality, connect Ukraine to the security cooperation frameworks in the region and engage external for the region players.

Russian aggression against Ukraine and growing instability around the world highlight old and pose new challenges to the states of Central Europe. In order to adequately respond to them, the countries of the region need to build their own resilience. This requires actions both in the security sphere and in ensuring the prosperity of the states and the well-being of their citizens. In this context, the importance of joint initiatives and projects of

⁹ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-30/ukraine-bids-to-join-nato-despite-long-odds-against-wartime-move>

¹⁰ https://www.president.pl/news/joint-statement-of-presidents-of-central-and-eastern-europe,59400?fbclid=IwAR0qKYxroGNiekNAAO1ybN9o-3YvCY1Oj8CdQap7AhKIUgoDv_jm7DkuXyl

Central European countries is growing. For Ukraine, cooperation with its closest neighbours in the west and southwest under constant threat from the east and north becomes vital. However, the Ukrainian side is also able to be a factor in ensuring the stability of its Central European partners.

Thanks to national unity, successful decisions of the military-political leadership and the help of allies, Ukraine broke the plans of the Russian aggressor to destroy Ukrainian statehood and the nation. The Kremlin is now resorting to terrorizing the civilian population and blackmailing the entire world with a nuclear threat in order to force Kyiv to negotiate. This means that the Ukrainian David is capable of defeating the Russian Goliath with asymmetric answers. However, the final victory over the Kremlin violator of international law is still far from reaching.

Even the restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity will not mean the end of the Russian threat to the country and all of Central Europe. Moscow also controls a self-proclaimed government in Belarus and illegal quasi-administrative entities in Moldova and Georgia. For many years, the Kremlin blackmailed its Western partners with energy, primarily influencing Central European countries. Today, in the case of Hungary, Russia continues to use oil and gas to exert political pressure on the country – and is unlikely to abandon this in the future. The Kremlin spreads lies about the war and relations with foreign actors through its embassies in Central European countries and may be involved in sabotage operations at defence-industrial complex enterprises in Bulgaria and the Czech Republic that have been taking place since 2014.

There is no reason to expect that Russia will abandon similar and other actions to maintain its destructive influence on the region. At the beginning of this year, the Kremlin demanded that NATO "return to the borders of 1997", which means excluding from its structure the states of Central Europe¹¹. This, in particular, indicates that Moscow considers the region at most as its exclusive zone of influence or at least as a "buffer territory" between itself and the "collective West." After all, it is most likely that Russia will continue its attempts to undermine the situation in the states of Central Europe, given the help they provide to Ukraine in its struggle for existence and following its goal to project its influence in Europe.

¹¹ <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/nato-vidpovid-rosiya-blinken-lavrov/31674567.html>

Changes taking place all over the world and affecting all European states should also be taken into account. In October 2022, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, noted that Europe is entering a perfect storm caused by global food and energy crises. According to him, the EU can no longer rely on cheap resources from Russia and China because of the threat to democracy and order from their side. In addition, the number of security threats has increased not only on the European-Russian border but also in other parts of the European neighbourhood. Josep Borrell believes that today's world is characterized by "messy multipolarity", a competitiveness "where everything is being weaponised" and the "rise of nationalism, revisionism and identity politics"¹². These challenges require a joint response from the EU. However, they also pose many challenges to individual European states.

Russia's attack against Ukraine demonstrated the importance of building "hard security" mechanisms at the national level. Unfortunately, the actions of the Kremlin have also returned Europe and the whole world to the realities of the Cold War, when states can guarantee the inviolability of their own borders by resorting to deterring the opponents through building up their own weaponry. As of early November 2022, the Defence Forces of Ukraine have destroyed more Russian tanks, armoured fighting vehicles, artillery systems, and multiple launch rocket systems than there are in the arsenal of any European country. The total number of enemy strike aircraft and helicopters destroyed has already exceeded 500¹³. These data show that no country today can guarantee its security by reducing armaments. Although it should be noted that the modernization of the defence sector is just as important: without having a quantitative advantage over the Russian invaders, the Defence Forces of Ukraine at various stages of the war used the technological advantages of unmanned aerial vehicles and high-precision artillery provided by foreign partners. The Russian-Ukrainian battles also demonstrated the importance of high-quality and real-time intelligence.

While the Ukrainian army is stopping the Russian offensive and liberating the territory of its country, the Central European states have time to draw

¹² https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-ambassadors-annual-conference-2022-opening-speech-high-representative-josep-borrell_en

¹³ <https://www.mil.gov.ua/news/2022/11/02/vid-pochatku-povnomasshtabnoi-vijni-proti-ukraini-rosiya-vtratila-vzhe-blizko-73270-osib-znishheni-1733-artilerijskih-sistemi-ta-387-rszv-voroga-generalnij-shtab-zsu/>

conclusions and take care of their own conventional threat response systems. A number of countries in the region – Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic – have already begun implementing programs to strengthen defence capabilities. In particular, they foresee an increase in spending on the security sector, the modernization of military equipment and technologies, and the expansion of the state's ability to respond to threats in various areas. However, the countries of Central Europe have not yet found a comprehensive answer to the main question that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine opened up: How to ensure acquiring of an acceptable amount of modern heavy equipment and artillery, as well as sufficient amounts of ammunition promptly?

The demand for the respective goods on the world market has increased significantly over the past months. The answer to this could be the growth of domestic production and the creation of regional and global industrial consortia and chains. It is also important for Ukraine, which needs a significant amount of ammunition, supply of new and repair of old units of heavy equipment and artillery to successfully resist the Russian invaders. In this context, it is worth noting the decision of the Polish government to purchase tanks, armoured combat vehicles and aircraft from the Republic of Korea with Polish components in them. The initiative of official Bratislava, Prague and Warsaw to repair and manufacture equipment and artillery for the Ukrainian army within the framework of the Copenhagen format should also be welcome.

At the same time, non-kinetic, non-linear, hybrid threats to the security of Central European countries should not be discounted. Russia has been building a system of influence in the region over the past two decades¹⁴. Today, most Central European states are trying to protect themselves from the Kremlin's sabotage operations. In particular, the Security Information Service of the Czech Republic during the past year and this year discovered several Russian agents who tried to promote pro-Russian and anti-European narratives in the country. The Slovak Ministry of Defence and Police recently launched a campaign to combat Russian disinformation in their country. In 2022, the Bulgarian special services discovered Russian agents and a network of experts and journalists who spread Kremlin propaganda. However, given the systematic work of Moscow on soft power and sabotage capabilities

¹⁴ Martin Vladimirov. Reassessing Russian influence. Economic and governance underpinning. The Russian Economic Grip on Central and Eastern Europe. Ed. by Ognian Shentov. Routledge. 2018.

in recent decades, it can be assumed that these revelations affected only part of the network of Russian proxies in the region. For the effectiveness of the further fight against hybrid impacts, comprehensive countermeasures initiatives are necessary on the scale of the region or the entire EU.

Another source of destabilization is Russian embassies. The monitoring of the activities of Russian diplomatic missions in Central Europe conducted by the Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism" shows that after the blocking of Moscow's main outlets in the EU, the missions themselves became the key disseminators of disinformation. Between 2010 and 2022, Central European countries expelled more than 350 Russian diplomats, with more than 250 of them stripped of their accreditation in 2022¹⁵ (including a large-scale expulsion from Bulgaria in June). Hungary became the only country in the region that allowed to increase the Kremlin's diplomatic representation. In general, the security of Central European countries requires their state and public actors to pay more attention to the activities of Russian embassies.

Another factor guaranteeing the national stability of the Central European states is ensuring energy security. Further economic well-being and sustainable development of the countries of the region also depend on the efficiency in this domain. Taking into account the comprehensive indicators of fuel and electricity imports, it can be stated that none of the countries of the region is autonomous in energy matters, but most of them do not have a critical level of general dependence. Thus, in 2020, the level of energy dependence in Moldova and Lithuania reached approximately 75%, in Hungary, Austria, Slovakia and Latvia it varied from 60% to 40%, in the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Ukraine and Romania – from 40% to 30%, in Estonia – reached 10%¹⁶.

However, Moscow has leverage over some of these countries hidden in the structure of their energy imports. Thus, in 2020, Moldova, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Hungary and Slovakia bought in Russia from 75% to 100% of all gas consumed; Bulgaria, Lithuania and Poland – from 40% to 70%, Romania – only 8%. Ukraine also consumed Russian fuel but purchased it

¹⁵ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/curtailing-russia-diplomatic-expulsions-and-war-ukraine>

¹⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/NRG_IND_ID__custom_1851622/bookmark/table?lang=en&bookmarkId=72cae929-3952-46b9-b363-f2a978a1fd64

through re-export from other countries¹⁷. Since then, some changes have taken place. In particular, Poland and Bulgaria completely refused further cooperation with Gazprom, and the rest of the countries of the region, except for Hungary, significantly reduced their contacts with Russian suppliers. However, for many, cooperation with Gazprom remains without an alternative in the short- and medium-term perspective. Official Budapest, which declares to maintain contacts with Moscow for decades to come, is especially noteworthy here. In Ukraine, due to the hostilities, the demand for gas has significantly decreased, so today the country provides itself with reserves and fuel of national production. The situation is similar with Russian oil. When the EU introduced an embargo on the supply of this type of fuel to Europe, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Bulgaria managed to postpone these restrictions for themselves, because their market and oil refineries do not have alternative raw materials¹⁸.

Over the summer, Russia caused raising electricity prices in the EU by cutting gas transit to Europe through Belarus, decreasing supplies through Ukraine, and gradually closing the valve on Nord Stream 1 (which later exploded under mysterious circumstances). Now the situation in this area is slowly stabilizing, but Moscow is creating a new energy crisis in the centre of Europe. By terrorizing Ukrainian citizens with the shelling of power facilities, Russian troops are also creating a shortage of electricity in Ukraine and limiting the country's export capabilities. This problem can also be felt by the country's neighbors in the days of the highest energy demand, for example, Moldova.

One of the biggest challenges for the states and societies of Central Europe in the medium and long term is the search for investments for large-scale modernisation and development of infrastructure (not only energy but also transport, industrial and digital). This problem concerns both the stability of countries and sustainable development in general. In recent years, most Central European countries have had higher average annual GDP growth

¹⁷ [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/NRG_TI_GAS__custom_3742740/default/table?
lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/NRG_TI_GAS__custom_3742740/default/table?lang=en)
[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/NRG_CB_GAS__custom_3742628/default/table?
lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/NRG_CB_GAS__custom_3742628/default/table?lang=en)

¹⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_2802

rates than the EU average¹⁹. However, these countries mostly remain net consumers and not net contributors within the EU, which means they depend on external capital injections. Responding to future financial challenges and new geopolitical realities requires Central European governments to create even more favourable conditions for investors and integrate their countries into new regional and global economic processes. In this sense, those states that create predictable legal norms for investment and conversion of infrastructure projects into business development/growth will have more chances for capital inflow.

However, it is worth remembering that under the new geopolitical conditions, governments should be even more attentive to which actors invest in the country and for what purpose. Political stability and democracy cannot be allowed to be undermined by economic interests. In this context, the role of the EU and the largest European economies, which seek to guarantee Europe's strategic autonomy, is growing. Attracting investments for the comprehensive development of Central Europe will also depend on their decisions. Considering this, the intention of the EU member's infrastructure ministers to modernise and revise the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) should be welcome. In the summer of 2022, Ukraine also joined it, which expands the possibilities of European actors to plan new corridors. It is worth noting that today the most comprehensive list of infrastructure projects for the development of Central Europe has been developed within the framework of the Three Seas Initiative. Taking into account the new geopolitical realities, the prospect of EU enlargement and the need for comprehensive reconstruction of Ukraine after the war, it would be valuable for the region if Kyiv and Chisinau strengthened their cooperation with the parties of this consortium, offering their own projects of regional interest.

An adequate response to all the indicated challenges for Central Europe is impossible without a consolidated position of state and non-state actors from different countries. The region successfully overcame difficulties only when states in it practiced solidarity. Central Europe has demonstrated its commitment to democracy and freedom, condemning Russia's violation of international law and the principles of humanity. The majority of Ukraine's western and southwestern neighbours have provided and continue to provide assistance to Ukraine to effectively fight against the aggressor and maintain the state's functionality. However, complex tests are ahead in the region. In

¹⁹ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tec00115/default/line?lang=en>

this context, the energy dependence on the Kremlin in which Hungary has found itself, as well as the position of the official Budapest regarding the fact that the Ukrainian forces should lay down their arms at the mercy of an unprincipled enemy, are particularly disturbing. Also, the freezing of cooperation within the framework of the Visegrad Four does not contribute to solving the urgent problems of Central Europe. The shortage of energy sources and the growth of inflation allow pro-Russian actors to divide the societies of the countries of the region. Only the strengthening of constructive cooperation between the governments of Central Europe, the leadership role of the EU in the implementation of bold transformations, and the development of horizontal ties between citizens can prevent the negative consequences of these situations.

Bearing this in mind, the following **recommendations** to strengthen stability, ensure prosperity and revitalize cooperation between the countries of Central Europe can be given:

- **In the domain of security:**

- It is necessary to move away from the practice of financing the country's defence capability on the residual principle. Both the hard and soft components of security under conditions of instability should be among the priorities of national governments. Strengthening the states' own capabilities (in compliance with the EU's and NATO's demands) will complement the security architecture established by NATO and the EU.
- To strengthen their security systems, the states of Central Europe should make maximum use of the available sources of the EU Peace Fund as the countries that are the first to face threats from Russia and Belarus.
- In this context, the states of the region should pay attention to the revival and/or development of their own defence-industrial complex, which would be capable of producing traditional and innovative types of conventional weapons. One of the pillars of implementing this intention can be the development of Central European production consortia and chains. It is also essential to include Ukrainian manufacturers and developers in this network.
- Hybrid threats require constant monitoring and prompt response from both state and civil actors. This security component should

become part of the activities not only of specialized government structures but also of any public institutions in the countries. In addition, establishing state-civilian partnerships to respond to hybrid threats can strengthen the resilience of states.

- **In the domain of politics:**

- In order to maintain the stability and resilience of the Central European states, the intensification of cooperation and enhanced solidarity between them is crucial. The crisis which Europe and the whole world are passing through is not the time for "ideological arguing" between the countries of the region and with other international subjects. Only coordinated actions under the umbrella of NATO and the EU can protect the region from authoritarian threats from the east and ensure its prosperity in the future.

- **In the domain of infrastructure and energy:**

- The states of the region have to develop and extend the existing infrastructure initiatives including those elaborated by the Three Seas Initiative member states and prioritized by the EU.
- In this regard the dual-use (civilian and military) transport corridors should be prioritized and extended to Ukraine and Moldova.
- Energy infrastructure networks have to be based on assured interoperability of the energy operators, and interconnectivity of energy networks.
- European Cross-border Cooperation Programs should be calibrated to contribute to further financing of "hard" infrastructure and energy-related projects and initiatives including co-funding of the extension of the prioritized TEN-T and TEN-E Projects.
- Special attention should be paid to the development of a new network of pipelines/interconnectors and to increasing the role of renewable energy in providing Central European countries. New gas transfer routes as a transition fuel should be laid out considering the REPowerEU plan to connect suppliers from Northern Europe, the Caucasus and North Africa. The EU and Europe's largest economies should play a key role in increasing

the role of renewable sources in the energy supply of Central Europe. This region remains the most dependent on fuel imports from Russia, so solving the relevant problems here is a vital issue for the security of all of Europe.

- **In the domain of people-to-people contacts:**

- Enhanced cooperation e.g. by means of an extension of the Think Visegrad Network beyond the V4 countries format, can be of added value. Ukrainian Central European Forum can serve as a Platform for defining priority areas of common interest and building partnerships between the think tankers in the region.
- Academic exchanges supported by the respective scholarships and fellowships can enhance contacts between early career scholars and scientists and assist in incubating regional scientific and result-oriented projects.
- Bearing in mind the perspective of large-scale enlargement of the EU in the coming decade, it is necessary to pay considerable attention to the creation of a network of the interaction of civil society actors in the member states and candidate states on the eastern and southeastern borders of the EU, for example, through the creation of consortia of civil society organizations. Such a "Central European arch" can become the basis for the intensification of political, economic, expert and social cooperation in the region in the future.



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