

# Security policy challenges in the 21st century: The role of big power politics in Central Europe

Hanna Shelest, PhD

Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism"

Security is in flux, as well as challenges that are dominating in a certain period of time. Central Europe is not an exception, it has passed the same road from the hard security priority during the Cold War time, to the significant concentration on the soft security challenges in the 1990s-2000s, to the present state when hard security and soft security challenges are becoming so interconnected that one cannot separate them. The 21<sup>st</sup> century is when many soft security challenges, like cyber, information, and energy, have been gradually moving to the camp of hard security. While the security concerns in Central Europe raised, the role of the big powers as a containment forcer or protectors has not.

However, not only security is transforming, but also those actors involved both in its jeopardizing and in its guaranteeing. Central European states of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia are currently a good study ground to understand the security challenges, who are the actors influencing the security, and the role of the so-called big powers in this process.

Since the four Visegrad states entered the EU and NATO, it was a feeling that the time for power competition over this region is over. As Roland Freudenstein mentions, "Once the Cold War ended, and the Iron Curtain came down, the possibility of regaining agency seemed to go along with the end of power politics for good". However, the history of the following decades proved that the power competition not ended but transformed as the methods of influence and interference developed. Malign influence is becoming a game-changer in the region.

One of the main questions to ask is whom we can define as big powers regarding the influence in Central Europe. The times of naming states as superpowers have passed, as none of the current actors is ready to possess all four characteristics – global capabilities, global interests, global responsibility, and nuclear power. Still, there is no immediate translation that only the USA and Russia (as a successor of the USSR) should be considered as big powers in the region.

In 2018, N.Popescu and S. Secrieru proposed to the number of experts to look at the role of "third powers" in Europe's East, thus naming China, Turkey, Iran, Arab states, and Israel<sup>1</sup>. Even if that research main subject was Eastern Partnership states, the idea of China as a third power, not the big power in the region, is to be examined. The main question is do we consider that the current stance is de facto competition between the West (USA) and Russia, where China is just a third power, an actor that is just framing its presence. Or do we accept that in terms of security concerns, it is already a play a-trois? In 2018, the authors of the above-mentioned publication looked at China's growing role in Eastern Europe, but the last three years demonstrated its significant development in Central Europe. 17+1 (16+1 since May 2021) and different economic and infrastructure projects is only one reason for so. The rise of nationalism, authoritarianism, and anti-Western sentiments (anti-EU first of all) due to the lack of democracy made Central European countries more open to the partnership with China. Yet one reason to name is that Beijing is seen as a more acceptable and less demanding partner than Moscow in current conditions. So after 2014, for some

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<sup>1</sup> Third Powers In Europe's East, Edited by Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secrieru, Chaillot Papers March 2018, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/third-powers-europes-east>

politicians, a dilemma of choosing between the West and East transformed from Washington-Moscow to Brussels-Beijing alternative.

The developments of the last ten years have clearly positioned China as a new big power in the region. But also, the question is whether we should refer to the EU and NATO as big powers when evaluating security challenges and responses to them. The reason is that even if all Central European states are members of both organizations, every once and a while, they are becoming the subjects of the policy of the above-mentioned organizations.

### **Methods and interests**

The five big powers concerned use different measures to secure their power and to project their influence. The soft power of the European Union, the Hard power of the USA, the Smart power of NATO, the Hybrid power of Russia, and the Sharp power of China.

Despite the 2017 NED's report<sup>2</sup> that named both Russia and China as sharp power actors in the region, I would not put them into the same basket regarding the Visegrad states. The reason is that Russia uses both military and non-military threats to project its power and influence policy-making in Central Europe. China's military power is of no concern to the Visegrad States, while Russian forces stationed in Kaliningrad or the Baltic Sea.

**Hybrid power of Russia.** Roland Freudenstein states: "Russia has used this influence to undermine the stability of democracy in the EU, and particularly in Central Europe, by sharp power methods such as elite capture, the support of extremist political parties, strategic corruption, disinformation and other tools". Despite all these methods being true and happened to be efficient, one factor is missed. Since 2014, the malign influence is well supported by the direct military threat. Poland has experienced a direct threat, while the other three countries needed to reconsider their defence spending and arrangements (e.g. Slovakia decided to de-mothball its tanks' capabilities). If in 2014, it was a fear that if Ukraine fall, so the Central European as well as Baltic states would be the next one, so by 2021, they needed to pay better attention to the undercover activities, espionage, and sabotage. The recent discovery of the Russian officers' role in 2014 Vrbětice ammunition warehouses explosions<sup>3</sup> presented food for thought about the level and scope of possible Russian threats.

Still, Russia continues its active malign influence, through media control and narratives spread, support of the far-right and far-left groups, populist and nationalist political leaders, and through the network of the organizations that both promote Russian soft-power and influence the political and security discourse inside of the Visegrad Four (e.g., Rossotrudnichestvo, Russkiy Mir Foundation, International Council of Russian Compatriots, Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund, etc.). History, Slavic background (in some countries), so-called traditional values play an important role in power and influence projection, especially when united with dissatisfaction with EU policies.

Finances are also the sphere where Moscow project its power towards Central Europe. As European Values Centre wrote in their report, "The International Investment Bank's presence in Hungary, where it has been headquartered since 2019, is a sign of the Kremlin's increasing "hybrid" or strategic power projection efforts reliant on both secret service activities and close ties between the Russian elite and European economic or

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<sup>2</sup> "Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence": New Forum Report, International Forum for Democratic Studies, December 5, 2017, <https://www.ned.org/sharp-power-rising-authoritarian-influence-forum-report/>

<sup>3</sup> Keno Verseck, "Is Russia behind the 2014 Czech munition depot blasts?", DW, April 20, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/is-russia-behind-the-2014-czech-munition-depot-blasts/a-57260551>

political decision-makers to counteract the sanctions regimes following the annexation of Crimea".<sup>4</sup> Vaccine diplomacy is another policy challenge and power projection gaining its place in the Central European states (first of all Slovakia and Hungary).

The question is why leaders in Hungary and the Czech Republic were easy to forget the harm of the Soviet power and brutally terminated revolutions of 1956 and 1968 respectfully, and appeared under the "charm" of the Russian President and his policies. The contradiction between security threats perception and political threats perception is clear in this case. A hope that better political relations would secure from the security threats brought some states (like the Czech Republic) into a trap.

Interestingly, in terms of narratives promotion, there are the same people, who are seen as pro-Russian ones or Russian proxies, and who endorses a pro-Chinese discourse in Central Europe. While competing in the economic and political sphere, Moscow and Beijing are playing at the same ground, getting a response from the same local actors.

**Sharp power of China.** De facto Beijing concentrates on three spheres - money, information, and image. China, comparing to Russia, is not intervening directly in the affairs of the Central European states. It gradually moved from promoting itself as a reliable economic partner, a good trade partner and investor that would like to facilitate infrastructure development for the good of all. These narratives worked well in the societies along the Silk Road packed in the brand of the One Belt-One Road initiative.

"Authoritarian influence efforts in young and vulnerable democracies are "sharp" in the sense that they pierce, penetrate, or perforate the information and political environments in the targeted countries. These regimes are not necessarily seeking to "win hearts and minds," [...] but they are surely seeking to influence their target audiences by manipulating or distorting the information that reaches them"<sup>5</sup>. In the case of Central Europe, the last years have been characterized by the increased espionage, first of all of technological nature, infrastructure projects and Chinese loans promotion, and spreading pro-Chinese narratives in media.

The new security challenges are connected with the 5G promotion through Huawei company activities. For example, Huawei has been a sensitive issue in Sino-Polish relations since January 2019, when Polish authorities arrested two telecom officials in an investigation into alleged espionage on behalf of Chinese security services, one of whom worked for Huawei in Poland.<sup>6</sup> While this can be seen as a technical issue on the first sight, the debates that it has raised in political and security circles, as well as public campaigns supported by China, which among others also include anti-Western (anti-US) elements among their narratives, bring this issue to the different security concerns level.

The old times, when Confucius Institutes or cultural festivals were the main elements of the soft power are passing. "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy" - an aggressive way of diplomacy and interests' protection, as well as image securing implemented by the official Chinese institutions, such as MFA - is taking its place. The most common triggers are challenging the One-China policy and support of the pro-democratic movement in

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<sup>4</sup> Lóránt Gyóri, "The Kremlin's Financial Octopus in Hungary – The International Investment Bank and Strategic Power Projection in Central-Eastern Europe", European Values Center for Security Policy, 2021, <https://europeanvalues.cz/en/the-kremlins-financial-octopus-in-hungary-the-international-investment-bank-and-strategic-power-projection-in-central-eastern-europe/>

<sup>5</sup> "Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence": New Forum Report, International Forum for Democratic Studies, December 5, 2017, <https://www.ned.org/sharp-power-rising-authoritarian-influence-forum-report/>

<sup>6</sup> Charles Burton, "Huawei's Geostrategic Role", European Values Center for Security Policy, 2020, <https://europeanvalues.cz/en/huaweis-geostrategic-role/>

Hong Kong, exclusion of Huawei from 5G networks, criticism of human rights abuses in China, protection against China's influence in local markets<sup>7</sup>; and the last but not the least – a role of China in the COVID-19 pandemic that recently being the main topic of promotion.

**Normative power of the European Union.** The soft power of the European Union has been closely connected with its normative power in Eastern Europe since the former communist states declared their goal of European integration. Security based on rules, democratic oversight, zero corruption, and economic growth – all that prevailed the European influence over the Central European states. Guaranteeing such values was seen as a shield from any turbulences.

However, this also played a bad joke with the Visegrad states. Used to talk about soft security issues, they were not ready for the security challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, such as migration crisis from the MENA region that became an apple of discord for the EU. This normative power was also seen as a problem as soon as more nationalistic, populist, and authoritarian leaders came to power in all four states. A conclusion by Roland Freudenstein that "The EU cannot become a global player and support international norms (i.e. 'export stability') without internal enforcement of values" is absolutely true. As most Eastern Partnership states are looking at the Central European states as an example of their possible transformation and transition, the degrading of democracy, inability to promote universal values and human rights inside the EU member-states affect the possibility of promoting democracy further to the East. But also give a fruitful soil for penetration of the pro-Russian and pro-Chinese narratives in these states.

Roland Freudenstein furthermore argues that "The EU will also have to 'learn the language of hard power', both by increasing its own military capabilities and improving sanction mechanisms but also by reinforcing cooperation with NATO, and particularly security cooperation with Britain after Brexit." Here, we would disagree with the first part - a necessity to increase the EU own military power. Except for PESCO that can increase security and military cooperation, and in which projects Visegrad states actively participate, deeper military cooperation may diffuse security policies and priorities when one will not see enhanced NATO-EU cooperation, but the overlap of norms, standards and priorities implementation within the states. What can be more effective is increased cooperation between the EU-NATO member-states, with those EU states that keep neutral status, but also with the three countries that signed Association Agreements (two from which are also NATO Enhanced Opportunity Partners) – Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. As they are in close proximity of the Central European states, so it will allow securing AA mechanisms for eastern borders security.

### **Hard power of the USA**

If at the beginning of the 1990s, the USA was seen as the biggest democracy and human rights promoter in the Central European states, so by the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, more and more Washington was mentioned in the framework of the security policy development and military cooperation. Poland actually was perceived as the main promoter of the US security agenda in Europe.

If the projection of "hard power" by military force is seen as the main element, the USA forces presence definitely symbolize this "hard power" presence in Central Europe. In 2014, the Department of Defence announced that 600 US soldiers would rotate to Poland as the next unit to participate in the reassurance initiative. According to Pentagon officials, "the United States is demonstrating its continued commitment to collective security through a series of actions designed to reassure NATO allies and partners of America's

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<sup>7</sup> Kateřina Urbancová, Howling diplomats: Select examples of China's "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy", European Values Center for Security Policy, 2021, <https://europeanvalues.cz/en/howling-diplomats-select-examples-of-chinas-wolf-warrior-diplomacy/>

dedication to enduring peace and stability in the region, in light of the Russian intervention in Ukraine."<sup>8</sup> The further deployment in 2017 was explained as an effort, which is "part of the nation's European Reassurance Initiative to maintain persistent, rotational presence of air, land, and sea forces in Central and Eastern Europe".<sup>9</sup> On June 12, 2019, President Trump and Polish President Duda announced that Poland would host 1,000 additional US troops under a new security agreement. With the increase, the total number of US forces typically deployed to the NATO ally as a deterrent to Russia would come to more than 5,000. Together with forces deployment in Lithuania and Romania, it has demonstrated a clear commitment to secure Eastern Europe and a return to the hard power standoff with Russia in Europe.

**Smart power of NATO.** The role of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization has risen since 2014. The immediate threat from the East urged for the increased security of the Eastern Flank. Enhanced Forward Presence became a smart power projection for NATO, as it has been a de-facto smart defence idea implementation when the deployment of the third states (also NATO members) allowed both to secure NATO as an organization and individual members of Central Europe.

Still, the security policy challenges remain. The Central European societies under the influence of the pro-Russian narratives, many of which are aimed to undermine trust in NATO, have their response among ordinary people. The biggest fear is that in case of any crisis, NATO will not be able to protect its Eastern Flank. So the logic behind this narrative is - if no protection guaranteed, why should we not consider a less resolve position about Russian aggression in Ukraine. This ill-logic, unfortunately, demonstrated its efficiency.

For NATO, it is important to demonstrate a real smart power when the lack of some countries capacities will be supplemented with sufficient presence or mechanisms to guarantee their security. Article 5 alone is not an answer anymore. Not only because it still lacks a clear and unanimous vision of its application in case of a cyber or hybrid attack (Crimean or Donbas style events in 2014), but also as the Russian narratives of incapable NATO, that would never protect its new members of the former Warsaw Pact, are getting their ground in all four Visegrad states.

## Conclusions

As security is in flux, so the policies of the Central European states and the role they allow the big powers to play in their development. A clear understanding and acceptance of the challenges that these countries face may facilitate their better resilience against the different types of power that third actors apply. Even if the easiest way would be to divide the big powers into two groups of those implying negative power (hybrid power of Russia and sharp power of China) and positive power (normative power of the EU, hard power of the US, and smart power of NATO, from the perspective of the Central European elites this will be an extra simplification.

In reality, a competition between different big powers, their intention to create alliances, e.g. Russia-China or EU-NATO, will have the biggest effect on the regional power projection. At the same time, we may see in the next five years a more profound domestic development of responses towards the security threats, as already see in Poland and the Czech Republic. It also may lead to a new policy formulation within the Visegrad Four arrangements in terms of security cooperation.

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<sup>8</sup> Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798-2020, Congressional Research Service, Updated July 20, 2020, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R42738.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> DOD, "Department of Defense Press Briefing by Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook in the Pentagon Briefing, 2017