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Counterbalancing And Pragmatic Accommodation: CEE Countries Towards Russia's Expansion, 2014-2021

The purpose of this article is to study the differentiation of CEE countries' approaches towards Russia's expansion, and then to identify explanatory variables. CEE policies fit to the balance of power categories, specifically: counterbalancing and accommodation. The method of assessing each CEE country's policies towards Russia combines gathering information on 2014-2021 activities classified in three groups: bilateral relations with Russia; relations with other NATO countries framed as counterbalancing Russia; relations with Ukraine regarding counterbalancing Russia. The method of explanation for diverse CEE policies consists in assigning quantitative values and applying statistics in order to discover correlations. The result of the first step is placing each CEE country on the axis of relatively pro- (Hungary) and anti-Russian (Lithuania and Poland) policies. The quantitative version of the axis serves as dependent variable in the statistical research which reveals final results: the strongest correlations are demonstrated by proximity and distance to Russia, which reflects Russia's closest neighbors' counterbalancing tendencies. Historical grievances and the size of Russian minorities are second-strongest. However, excluding Hungary, historical grievances become the strongest factor of anti-Russian policies.

Introduction

The year 2014 was a serious breakthrough in Russia's expansion. Russia officially annexed Crimea and backed separatists in Donbas, starting a long-term limited war against Ukraine. The security crisis shocked the European elites, but countries with fresh experience of Soviet dominance were particularly interested in correct responses to that security challenge. While

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Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has not fixed boundaries, for the purpose of this article CEE is limited to post-communist countries which joined NATO and EU before 2014: Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. In sum, 11 countries which could frame their policies in the rising antagonism between Russia and the West.

Academic literature on CEE foreign policies is quite limited, worse still, it lacks systematic research on responses to such essential phenomenon as Russia's open expansion. There exist case studies of selected countries' policies towards Russia (Holzer & Mareš eds., 2020; Zając, 2016: ch. 5), and plenty of publications on Russia's expansion itself (Götz, 2017, 2019; Korolev, 2015; Rutland, 2019). Alternatively, some scholars examine EU and thus CEE countries towards Russia, few among academics, however, have scrutinized the post-annexation period (Orenstein & Kelemen, 2017; Silva II, 2022). While imperial and hegemonic threats in the East of Europe attract attention of media, think tanks and policy makers, the academic literature lacks comprehensive research on general patterns of CEE policies toward the Russian challenge to European security.

1. Theoretical Framework, Research Aims and Methodology

The balance of power theory originated from classical thought and is firmly embedded in the realist thought in International Relations. At present the balance of power theory applies several categories. There have been vigorous academic debates on specific intermediate categories on the continuum between hard (counter)balancing and bandwagoning. Scholars already introduced: hedging, accommodation, engagement, binding and many more (Lobell, Jesseb, & Williams, 2015). Counterbalancing and accommodation can be considered as major responses to great power threats as categories which accurately reflect CEE countries' approaches. As He (2012) correctly noticed, accommodation is essentially reciprocal¹, counterbalancing does not have to be. Accommodation is not only responsive, but it requires some diplomatic effort and seizing opportunities. Further, it entails some flexibility, even retreats (He, 2012: 55). Accommodation draws particular attention of scholars regarding various countries' responses to the rise of China, but also as an effective strategy to de-escalate threats (Akcinaroglu & Radziszewski, 2017). Some scholars emphasize that accommodation is preferable by lesser powers (Ross, 2006) and that the uncertainty of power politics is more accurately

reflected by accommodation than by balancing or bandwagoning (Kirchner, 2012: 54).

Counterbalancing takes place when lesser powers want to defend their interests or existence and its repeated pattern is joining one great power vis-à-vis another great power. This indicates the condition of similarity of strategies between a great power and a lesser power in front of another great power's threat (Ross, 2006). Scholars identified some specific types of counterbalancing. Its extreme version, which applies mass militarization, is not the case of CEE countries between 2014 and 2021. The practice was limited counterbalancing whose subjects faced external, i.e., economic limits, and exercised self-restraints because of potential retaliatory measures. Like accommodation, limited counterbalancing draws particular attention of scholars interested in explaining Asian and Pacific countries' responses to the rise of China (De Castro, 2022; Han & Paul, 2020) or 'Atlanticist' EU countries² towards Russia (Silva II, 2022). A more specific type of strategy is soft balancing which finds expression through acts of establishing, using or dominating international institutions (He, 2008; Wivel & Paul, 2020) and this type of strategy was to some extent conducted by the CEE countries, however, far from their major effort³.

CEE responses to the Russian expansion do not differ much from discrepant responses of Indo-Pacific countries towards China (He, 2012) or western countries towards Iran (Wagner & Onderco, 2014). Hence the following analysis applies concepts of continuum of approaches towards a single power as a threat. The article does not intend to interfere into discrepancies among scholars regarding the specific categories as most accurate to catch the political virtue. As further analysis demonstrates, CEE countries between 2014 and 2021 chose only intermediate strategies, far from bandwagoning and extremely confrontational counterbalancing.

The purpose of this article is to study the differentiation of CEE countries towards Russia, and then to identify causes which explain this differentiation. To adequately address these aims, the article firstly applies the method of assessing each CEE country's policies towards Russia, which combines gathering information on policies clearly supportive or contradictory with Russia's interests. Russia itself determined the context of counterbalancing or accommodation by its expansion in Ukraine, whereas CEE countries determined that background by accession to NATO and EU. Thus CEE responses can be divided into three groups. First, activities conducted directly towards Russia such as official high-level visits, signing agreements or contracts, permissions to enter a given country's territory by extraordinary entities, activities toward the Russian presence on their energy

markets. Second, it is about acting in NATO and using its structures. All the CEE countries have been NATO members since 1999-2009, nonetheless, their activities in the Alliance varied. Additionally, the Alliance, and particularly the USA under Donald Trump, laid stress on the 2% GDP standard of NATO members' military budgets. Taking this caveat into account, activities in NATO and defense expenses serve as imperfect but relatively accurate indicators of counterbalancing Russia.⁴ Third, the core of the Russian expansion of the analyzed period was the annexation of Crimea and Russia's military involvement in the Donbas war. Logically, providing Ukraine with support reflects the spectrum of pro-/anti-Russian policies, despite some problems with CEE countries' bilateral relations with Ukraine.

Once all the necessary data are gathered, CEE policies can be explicated in a simplified way. The final result of the descriptive part concludes with an axis presenting a variety of policies between partially pro-Russian line (accommodation) and strongly anti-Russian (hard counterbalancing). This simplified result serves as a starting point for the second purpose of the article: the general explanation of the diversity of CEE approaches. Activities towards Russia's expansion are thus the dependent variable. The following independent variables have been taken into account: historical experiences with Russia; geographic proximity to Russia; distance of CEE capital cities to Moscow; military power; energy supply from Russia; the size of the Russian minority; economic situation; religious/civilizational similarities with Russia. Details on variables are explicated in section 4.

The examination of CEE policies encounters some methodological problems. CEE countries have separate heads of states and governments led by prime ministers. Therefore cases of discrepancies among a given country's highest officials require simplification. Another problem results from incoherence between some policymakers' doubts in the status of Crimea and sending high-level representatives to attend the summit of the Crimea Platform established by Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Also, it is presumed in the article that arms sales have less in common with counterbalancing than arms donations, but the intentions can be similar. The last problem is limited or confidential data. For instance, media released that Hungary allowed Russia to cross the Hungarian airspace to deliver military equipment to Serbia (Bayer, 2019), but a look at the map indicates that some other countries must have agreed too. Likewise, there appear problems with information limits: Pavlo Barbul, director of the Ukrainian-state Spetstechnoexport, admitted that at least five unspecified Eastern European countries had permitted the commercial sale of Soviet-era ammunition to Ukraine (Marzalik & Toler, 2018), but details remain confidential.

2. Description of CEE Countries' Policies

Bulgaria

The key cooperative diplomatic event was the Russian prime minister and former president Dmitry Medvedev's arrival at Sofia in 2019, who met with top officials including president Rumen Radev and prime minister Boyko Borisov (The Sofia Globe, 2019). However, contrary to that friendly atmosphere, Bulgaria conducted investigations about spying and expelled two Russian diplomats in January 2020, then two more in September. Further, some Russian citizens were forbidden entrance, and the authorities initiated prosecution of the chair of a pro-Russian NGO (Todorov, 2021a). Meanwhile, another diplomat was declared *persona non grata* in solidarity with Czechia (Radio Free Europe, 2021). On the other hand, Bulgarian authorities gave multiple permissions for using the Bulgarian airspace for Russian military deliveries to Serbia (Radio Free Europe, 2020). As for Bulgaria's dependence on Russian energy resources, after some insistence of the European Commission the authorities abandoned the Russian South Stream project. However, Bulgaria soon approved the connection to the Turk Stream pipeline by a new leg along with Russia's and some Balkan countries' interests. As for the establishment of US military bases in Bulgaria, experts emphasize Bulgaria's worries of Turkey whose powerful army has been used in numerous foreign interventions, and a large Turkish minority in Bulgaria could cause tensions (Pieńkowski, 2019). On the other hand, due to worsening relations with Russia the USA finally considered their military presence as multifunctional, with potential counter-Russian usage. Importantly, Bulgarian policies towards Russia were not completely balanced in the period 2014-2021. President Rosen Plevneliev, in office until 2017, and prime minister Borisov were quite critical to Russia's expansion in the Black Sea region, but without applying open counterbalancing (Wezeman & Kuimova, 2018). A notable discursive change took place by the president Radev who de facto approved the annexation of Crimea (Todorov, 2021b). The relative poverty of Bulgaria, the least developed member of the EU, together with the US presence allowed not to exaggerate with the increase in defense spending with the single exception of US F-16 aircraft purchase. As for Ukraine, Bulgaria did not carry out any open actions to support its military, however, permitted some companies to conduct arms trade, but Bulgarian munitions were also reportedly used by separatists (Marzalik & Toler, 2018). As of 2016, Bulgaria participated in two projects of NATO military assistance for Ukraine: medical rehabilitation; logistics and standardization (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2016). Prime minister Borisov visited Kyiv in

2018 which was the only official meeting at this level except the 2021 Crimea platform. Considering the above inconsistencies, Bulgaria remained the case of pragmatic and mixed policy towards Russia's security challenge.

Croatia

Likewise, Croatia demonstrated a mixed attitude towards Russia. President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović was strongly involved in the establishment of Three Seas Initiative (TSI) which aimed at boosting infrastructural investments in CEE and thus strengthening the region's position, also towards Russia. However, the construction of the Krk gas terminal was not intended to alter the national or regional dependence upon gas from Russia. Contrary to counter-Russian expectations of Poland, co-initiator of TSI, Grabar-Kitarović conducted a three-day (!) visit in Moscow in 2017, and more bilateral meetings in both Moscow and Zagreb were arranged in the period 2014-2021. The expulsion of one Russian diplomat after the Skripal incident (Dewan et al., 2018) was the only unfriendly step taken by the authorities directly towards Russia. Croatia's defense policy took into account NATO commitments, nevertheless, officials avoided references to Russia in justifications for sending contingents to Poland and Lithuania, as if this had been unrelated to counterbalancing (Pavlic, 2017). Grabar-Kitarović's successor Zoran Milanović, earlier prime minister, expressed opinions much more sensitive towards Russia's interests. For instance, he opposed to TSI as an attempt to "isolate" Russia (HINA, 2020). He also criticized prime minister Andrej Plenković for visiting Kyiv who, in turn, responded by repeating a hedging-like slogan that better relations with Ukraine were not directed against Russia (Trkanjec, 2021). During one of Kyiv visits Plenković offered a solution for peace: his country's expertise in reintegration of Eastern Ukraine which met with public rejection by the Russian diplomacy (Milekic, 2016). Croatian officials also ensured that the annexation of Crimea was recognized as illegal and violating human rights. In sum, Croatia's mixed responses to the Russian expansionism reflected pragmatism enriched with hedging discourse.

Czechia

Long-term pragmatism towards Russia resulted in years of ignorance about Czechia's strong dependence on Russian energy resources. A positive attitude towards Russia was mainly manifested by president Miloš Zeman who, contrary to governmental officials, expressed criticism to sanctions against Russia (Foy & Oliver, 2015). He also invited a pro-Russian

organization of Crimean Tatars to celebrate the anniversary of the foundation of Czechoslovakia (Datskevych, 2019). The Czech president became famous of his de facto acceptance of the annexation of Crimea by saying it was “fait accompli” and the best for Ukraine was to negotiate rewards, which met with criticism of other Czech officials including prime minister Bohuslav Sobotka (Radio Free Europe, 2017). Aside from Zeman’s activities, several Czech institutions took unfriendly steps towards Russia. For instance, Prague municipality authorities challenged the Russian historical policy on the 1945 liberation, whereas the government reacted on the Skripal affair with the expulsion of three Russian diplomats, and many more in result of the investigation into explosion in Vrbětice ammunition depot. The counterintelligence report published in 2021 directly accused the Russian military intelligence GRU of preparing the explosion. The government expelled 18 Russian diplomats and decided to considerably reduce the embassy staff which led to further expulsions. However, prime minister Andrej Babiš mitigated condemnation by saying that the Russian attack was not state terrorism but an attempt to harm transfer of munitions owned by a Bulgarian company (Radio Prague International, 2021). By the same token, Zeman demanded not to exaggerate with “hysteria” (Euronews, 2021a). Regarding military activities, years of economizing impeded Czechia to fulfil its commitment to contribute to NATO groups in Latvia and Lithuania. The Czech forces were deployed as late as in summer 2018. With the exception of Zeman’s activities, Czechia’s relations with Ukraine were friendly for the entire post-annexation period. For instance, during the visit in Kyiv Babiš invited Ukraine to attend V4 summit (Kyiv Post, 2019). The Vrbětice affair proved that Czechia allowed to provide Ukraine with secret “lethal” military assistance on a minor scale. The Czech policies towards Russia’s expansion can be framed as pragmatic with limited anti-Russian tendencies, since Zeman’s role was mainly discursive, i.e. detached from material actions taken by the government.

Estonia

Russia as a threat was spoken out by Estonian top officials (e.g. Schmitt, 2016). The most assertive Estonia’s action was certainly not permitting the Russian sailing ship to enter Estonian waters due to the Crimea-trained cadets among its crew (France24, 2019). Along with this approach, Estonia expelled one Russian diplomat each time after the Skripal and Vrbětice affairs. Contrary to some CEE countries, Estonian policymakers have never raised any doubts in sanctions on Russia. Moreover, Estonian president Kersti Kaljulaid encouraged to maintain sanctions in the long run, calling

for “strategic patience” (Removska, 2021). Estonian authorities perceived the Russian 2014 expansion in Ukraine as a serious challenge to national security. As a result, the increase of defense budget since 2014 was considerable. Both contemporary president Toomas Ilves and prime minister Taavi Roivas made diplomatic effort to invite NATO forces permanent basing which resulted in the establishment of the UK-led NATO battle group. In the field of energy, Estonia initiated preparations for construction of two gas terminals. Estonia also supported Ukraine with multifaceted military assistance and training (Embassy of Estonia, 2021) which fits to the category of counterbalancing. For instance, in 2021 Estonia publicly considered sending advanced weaponry such as 5-inch howitzers and anti-tank missiles (Ukrinform, 2021). The whole Estonian approach was consistently anti-Russian.

Hungary

Hungary is famous of its reluctance to anti-Russian policies. At the top diplomatic level, prime minister Viktor Orbán maintained particularly cordial relations with Vladimir Putin. Hungary was the only EU country which agreed on the purchase of the nuclear powerplant facilities from Russia, noticeably, financed by the Russian loan. During the Covid pandemic Hungary purchased vaccines from Russia and, contrary to Slovakia, did not withdraw from this decision. Earlier the government permitted Russia to use the Hungary’s airspace to deliver arms to Serbia (Bayer, 2019). All these decisions Orbán supported with the pro-Russian discourse, such as saying that Putin “rules a great and ancient empire” (Janjevic, 2018). However, not all the activities towards Russia were friendly: for instance, Hungary expelled one diplomat in response to the Skripal affair. As for the rise of defense budget, doubled between 2014 and 2020, the government officials emphasized threats other than Russia such as mass migrations (Hungary Today, 2021a), and notably, Hungary was the only CEE country without substantial counterbalancing forces on NATO eastern flank, although it sent infantry for NATO exercises in Baltic countries and its four combat aircraft contributed to Baltic Air Policing (BAP) (Gotkowska, 2015). A more challenging issue is to assess Hungary’s policy towards Ukraine, because of problems with the Hungarian minority’s educational rights and the Hungarian double-citizenship policy which both provoked highly critical statements such as doubts in democratic transition of Ukraine (Sadecki, 2014). However, Hungary also joined the Crimea platform, and president János Áder expressed his understanding for the people of Ukraine because of the annexation of Crimea which he called an “open wound” (Hungary Today, 2021b). Due to the dispute over minority rights there is no certainty to what extent the Hungarian relations with Ukraine reflect its

policy towards Russia. What is observable is the lack of such support to frame it as counterbalancing Russia. Despite some minor activities contrary to Russian interests, the approach of Hungary can be labeled moderately pro-Russian and framed as a shining example of accommodation among CEE countries⁵.

Latvia

The Russian deceptive attacks on Ukraine in 2014 made a strong impact on the Latvian politics and security affairs. After 2014 Latvia gradually resigned from any military cooperation with Russia. The domestic factor also played a role in the Russo-Latvian relations. In 2018 after years of non-citizenship policy Latvia introduced even harsher regulations on the language in the minority schools and classes, aimed to drastically reduce the use of Russian. In the public discourse Latvian high officials emphasized sovereign rights in implementing such laws (France24, 2018). Latvia expelled one Russian diplomat after the Skripal incident and another one as a consequence of the Vrbětice affair. After years of economizing due to a tremendous post-2008 crisis, Latvia started with its military budget below 1% of GDP, but increased it to 2.1-2.2%. As a result of the 2016 NATO summit Latvia has hosted the Canada-led multinational NATO battle group. The authorities initiated studies on the construction of a large gas terminal to ensure energy security. Counterbalancing towards Russia was also reflected in support for Ukraine, initially medical assistance, later more advanced kinds including training and delivery of defensive weapons. Deputy prime minister Artis Pabriks (2019) indicated direct link between the Russian attacks on Ukraine with threats to Latvia itself. In result, Latvian policymakers took diplomatic steps with a clear purpose of delegitimization of Russia's expansion such as the visit of president Raimonds Vējonis in Eastern Ukraine in 2018 and the meeting with representatives of the Crimean Tatars in exile (President of the Republic of Latvia, 2018). The Latvia's approach was anti-Russian but less confrontational than Estonia's.

Lithuania

Tensions in Lithuanian-Russian relations have had a long history and the attacks on Ukraine caused their further increase. In summer 2014 an incident prompted public speculations on "a hybrid attack" due to the unexpected stop of a Russian train, then surrounded by the Lithuanian police (Gerdžiūnas, 2020). Lithuania manifested its radicalism towards Russia in expulsions of diplomats: three were expelled due to the Skripal affair, over 20 Russian citizens were sanctioned and more than 20 banned entry (Dewan

et al., 2018). Three years later Lithuania expelled two Russian diplomats in solidarity with Czechia (Euronews, 2021b). The authorities made effort to decrease dependence on Russian energy even before 2014. Its capstone has been the floating storage regasification unit in Klaipėda and foreign contracts on gas supply. Tensions with Russia were also reflected in official discourse, in particular, by president Dalia Grybauskaitė who compared Putin's methods to Hitler and Stalin's (Martin, 2014) and stressed how big the Russian threat was. After the annexation of Crimea Lithuania restored selective conscription and enormously increased its defense budget. Along with the NATO summit in 2016 started to host the Germany-led battle group. It also solicited for reinforcement because of the potential attack over the "Suwałki gap" (Weymouth, 2017). Along with the rule of counterbalancing, Lithuania contributed considerable assistance to Ukraine. For instance, it was the first country officially delivering "lethal weapons" in 2014 and provided Ukrainian officers with training opportunities (Marzalik & Toler, 2018). Thus the Lithuania's policies in response to the Russian expansionism can be called strongly anti-Russian.

Poland

Polish policymakers consequently condemned the annexation of Crimea and Russia's support for separatists in Donbas. For instance, prime minister Donald Tusk warned against "new Yalta" plotted by Russia (Dziennik.pl, 2014). In result of the 2014 security crisis, Poland suspended high-level meetings with the Russian representatives. The right-oriented government who took power in 2015 went even further: for instance, it decided to withdraw from visa-free border traffic with the Kaliningrad Oblast. The new energy strategy was to cease any long-term contracts on the Russian gas after 2022, which was based on the reinforcement of the gas terminal in Świnoujście and a new pipeline from Denmark (Business Insider, 2016). Poland demonstrated eagerness in expulsions of Russian diplomats: four due to the Skripal affair and three in solidarity with the USA after allegedly Russian cyberattacks (Warsaw Institute, 2021). On the field of defense, Poland increased its budget to over 2% of GDP, agreed on the establishment of the US "anti-rocket shield", after years of diplomatic steps achieved the establishment of the US-led NATO battle group near "Suwałki corridor" and separately US armed forces in other locations of the country. Meanwhile, Poland contributed to multifaceted assistance for Ukraine. It was the first country which sent "non-lethal" arms to Ukraine, namely body armors and munitions, although more ambitious projects of joint arms collaboration failed (Ponomarenko, 2017). As of 2016, Poland was the third global supplier with non-lethal weapons for

Ukraine worth over 5.4 million USD (Goble, 2016). Some tensions regarding interpretations of history harmed cooperation on the governmental level, however, president Andrzej Duda took the role of the major supporter of Ukraine on the international arena. Like Lithuania, Poland demonstrated a strongly anti-Russian approach to the security challenge from the East.

Romania

As the second largest country in CEE and a neighbor of Ukraine Romania might be strongly involved in the problematic of regional security. Immediately after the annexation of Crimea Romania's policy towards Russia seemed to be careful, nonetheless, it took soon more unfriendly actions. The most conflicting was blocking access to Transnistria for the deputy prime minister Dmitry Rogozin's airplane, whereas Belarus, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary accepted the flight (Touma, 2017). Likewise, Romania blocked its airspace for delivering military vehicles to Serbia (Bayer, 2019). Further, Romania expelled one Russian diplomat due to the Skripal affair and another one in solidarity with Czechia (Berry, 2021). The discourse among policymakers mixed confrontational and mitigating statements: from the urgency to draw a red line to Russia's aggressiveness by prime minister Victor Ponta (Business Review, 2014) to the need for partnership and dialog by former prime minister Viorica Dăncilă (2020). Also president Klaus Iohannis demonstrated assertiveness after Putin's threats (Paun, 2016). In the 2000s Romania deepened its security relations with NATO, agreed on the establishment of US bases including air-defense system for protection against ballistic threats from the Middle East. In the period 2014-2021 security ties with NATO were consequently strengthened including exchanges of military contingents with Poland and modernization of bases to host US and NATO forces. Multiple presidential visits in Ukraine served as instruments of diplomatic support since 2014. However, the Ukrainian 2017 educational reform posed a serious obstacle to bilateral relations: Romania expressed its concern over the pressure of the use of Ukrainian and president Iohannis cancelled his visit to Kyiv (Raczkiewicz, 2017). The tensions about languages and education remained valid in the Romanian-Ukrainian relations until 2021, nevertheless, the new Ukrainian president Zelenskyy attempted to focus on broader security perspective between both countries. Importantly, Romania many times emphasized disagreement over territorial changes in Ukraine carried out by Russia. In sum, unfriendly steps mitigated by state officials lead to label the Romania's policies moderately anti-Russian.

Slovakia

After the 2014 security crisis Slovak authorities made numerous attempts to improve Slovakia's relations with Russia. Prime minister Robert Fico, the leader of the dominant party ruling between 2012 and 2020, repeatedly visited Russia and raised public doubts in economic sanctions (Eriksson, 2016). Likewise, his successor and party subordinate prime minister Peter Pellegrini visited Russia and agreed on receiving gas from Nord Stream 2. After the 2020 breakthrough on the Slovak political arena there appeared more discrepancies towards Russia. When prime minister Igor Matovič successfully negotiated the delivery of the Russian vaccines, he provoked a governmental crisis, which shows some limits in Slovakia's pragmatism. Presidents Andrej Kiska and Zuzana Čaputová expressed reluctance to the pro-Russian approach and supported EU sanctions. In the Slovak political system presidents have no decision-making competencies in foreign policy, so this discourse should be interpreted as a secondary component to governmental policies. Interestingly, Slovakia did not join the multiple countries' measures against Russia in response to the Skripal incident, but after the Vrbětice affair the government demonstrated immediate solidarity with Czechia by expelling three Russian diplomats (Euronews, 2021b). There is no evidence that the Russia's 2014 expansion led to a serious increase of the Slovakia's defense budget. This materialized five years later and was related to criticism to combat (in)capabilities. Specifically, the purchase of US F-16 aircraft and then the use of armed forces to limit the Covid epidemic implied the most substantial growth (Ministry of Finance of the Slovak Republic et al., 2020). Due to problems with combat readiness Slovakia sent land forces to Latvia only for exercises, maintained two (!) staff officers in the NATO battle group and as late as in 2018 reinforced the contingent with an infantry company. As for Slovakia's relations with Ukraine, they faced serious difficulties after the 2009 gas crisis, nevertheless, in 2014 Slovakia supported Ukraine with reverse flow. Further, Slovakia delivered relatively high value of non-lethal military assistance for Ukraine: 774 thousand USD as of 2016, 2nd largest among CEE countries (Goble, 2016). Military cooperation with Ukraine was considerably boosted in 2021 when a series of joint military exercises took place (Ministry of Defence of the Slovak Republic, 2021). Slovakia remained less involved in anti-Russian activities than its neighbor Czechia, and thus its approach might be framed as pragmatic and mixed.

Slovenia

From 2014 onwards, Slovenia observably strove for improving its economic relations with Russia. It attracted the West's public attention by prime minister Miro Cerar's insistence on withdrawing sanctions (Cerni & Khrennikova, 2015) and by numerous high-level meetings in Moscow and Ljubljana. The approach seemed to be purely pragmatic, because simultaneously Slovenian officials pledged their disagreement over unlawfulness of the annexation of Crimea and the significance of good relations with Western countries (Total Slovenia News, 2019). Slovenia avoided diplomatic tensions with Russia such as expulsions of its diplomats. For years it sought for boosting bilateral business connections. It also did not demonstrate the strong need of military counterbalancing Russia – its defense budget remained only slightly larger after 2014, although up to 50 Slovenian troops were sent to serve in the NATO battle group in Latvia (Republic of Slovenia government, 2022). Interestingly, as of 2016, Slovenia was the only CEE country without participation in NATO or bilateral military assistance for Ukraine (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2016). Nevertheless, the government made some diplomatic effort to support Ukraine with its pro-Western aspirations, reflected in the visit of prime minister Janez Janša in Kyiv in 2021. Slovenia's overall policy regarding Russian expansionism can be interpreted as accommodative, showing the tendency for pro-Russian discourse, relatively good bilateral relations, and restrained from support for Ukraine.

Table 1. CEE Countries' Activities Regarding Russia's 2014-2021 Expansion

	Activities towards Russia	Activities in NATO	Activities towards Ukraine
Bulgaria	High-level meetings; mixed policy on gas delivery; expulsions of diplomats (mainly due to domestic spy affairs); permissions for using airspace	Defense budget: 1.31% (2014), 3.13% (2018), 1.62% of GDP (2021); host of US bases	Limited military support (permission for delivering Bulgaria-made equipment by other countries; participation in NATO technical aid); limits in high-level meetings; mixed discourse
Croatia	High-level meetings; single diplomat expulsion; hedging-like discourse	Defense budget: 1.82% (2014), 1.55% (2018), 2.16% of GDP (2021); contingents in Poland and Lithuania	No official military support (except participation in NATO technical aid); high-level meetings; mixed discourse
Czechia	Limits in high-level meetings; expulsions of multiple diplomats; disputes over history; mixed discourse	Defense budget: 0.94% (2014), 1.4% of GDP (2021); contingents in Lithuania and Latvia	Limited military support: "non-lethal" weapons; participation in NATO technical aid; high-level meetings

Estonia	Open confrontations: blocking access to territorial waters; expulsions of diplomats; discourse: threats	Defense budget: 1.93% (2014), 2.35% (2020), 2.16% of GDP (2021); host of NATO battle group	Substantial military support; multiple high-level meetings
Hungary	High-level meetings; exclusive economic relations; official permission for Russian military transit; single diplomat expulsion; discourse: respect	Defense budget: 0.86% (2014), 1.78% (2020), 1.69% of GDP (2021); limited participation in BAP	No official military aid (except participation in NATO technical aid); no high-level meetings with the exception of Crimea Platform; severe criticism over minority rights; mixed discourse
Latvia	Open confrontations related to domestic affairs; expulsions of diplomats; discourse: threats	Defense budget: 0.94% (2014), 2.2% (2020), 2.16% of GDP (2021); host of NATO battle group	Limited military support (no open "lethal" military aid; participation in NATO technical aid); multiple high-level meetings
Lithuania	Open confrontations: personal sanctions, multiple expulsions of diplomats; reducing dependence on Russian gas; antagonistic discourse	Defense budget: 0.88% (2014), 2.03% of GDP (2021); host of NATO battle group	Substantial military aid (e.g. first supplier with "lethal weapons"); multiple high-level meetings
Poland	Open confrontations: suspension of the Kaliningrad visa regime; reducing dependence on Russian gas; multiple expulsions of diplomats; discourse: threats	Defense budget: 1.86% (2014), 2.34% of GDP (2021); host of NATO battle group, US forces; contingent in Latvia; BAP	Substantial military aid (e.g. first "non-lethal weapon" supplier); multiple high-level meetings
Romania	Open confrontations: blocking airspace; single diplomats expulsions; hedging-like discourse	Defense budget: 1.35 (2014), 2.03% (2020), 1.88% of GDP (2021); host of US bases; contingent in Poland	No official bilateral military support; participation in NATO technical aid; high-level meetings; criticism over minority rights
Slovakia	Multiple high-level meetings until 2020; expulsion of diplomats in solidarity with Czechia; implicit acceptance of the dependence on Russian gas	Defense budget: 0.99% (2014), 1.95% (2020), 1.73% of GDP (2021); (initially symbolic) contingent in Latvia	Discrepancies among policymakers: criticism and support; presidential meetings; no official military support (except participation in NATO technical aid)
Slovenia	High-level meetings; no expulsions of diplomats; pragmatic pro-Russian discourse	Defense budget: 0.97% (2014), 1.22% of GDP (2021); limited contingent in Latvia	No official military support; limits in high-level meetings

Source: own elaboration. Data on defense budgets: North Atlantic Treaty Organization (2022); data on NATO technical aid: North Atlantic Treaty Organization (2016).

The last point of this section is a brief summary of CEE less confrontational policies towards Russia to reveal a better picture. Bulgaria and Hungary did not send permanent contingents to Baltic countries or Poland. Bulgaria, Slovakia, Slovenia did not expel diplomats due to the Skripal incident. Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia did not expel diplomats due to Vrbětice affair. However, V4 countries, i.e. also Hungary and Poland expressed solidarity with Czechia and condemned violent actions of the Russian intelligence (The Slovak Spectator, 2021). As mentioned earlier, Slovenia did not participate in NATO technical assistance for Ukraine established at 2016 Warsaw summit (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2016). However, it should be reminded in the end that all the CEE countries imposed and multiple times prolonged EU sanctions against Russia and sent high-level representatives on the Crimea Platform meeting in Kyiv in 2021, which frames their policies far from quintessentially pro-Russian.

3. The Scale of CEE Countries' Approaches

For the purpose of explanatory statistical research, the above depiction needs to be transformed into a simplified scheme. CEE activities can be framed on a scale between pro- and anti-Russian. Because all of the CEE countries belong to Western structures and accepted EU sanctions, it would be impractical to display the full spectrum of security approaches towards Russia. The reference points are: first, Hungary as closest to more pro-Russian; second, Lithuania and Poland as closest to more anti-Russian.

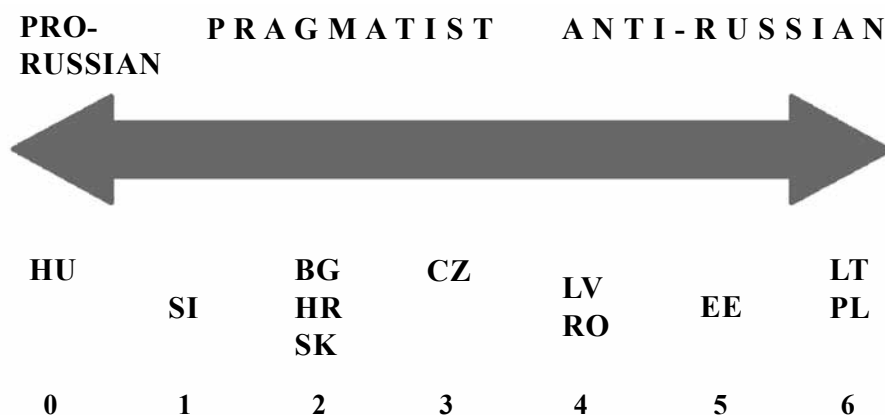


Figure 1. The variety of CEE approaches towards Russia's 2014-2021 expansion

Figure 1 presents the axis of approaches according to the scale which allows to indicate countries: moderately pro-Russian (Hungary); pragmatist with limited pro-Russian tendencies (Slovenia); pragmatist, mixed (Bulgaria, Croatia, Slovakia); pragmatist with limited anti-Russian tendencies (Czechia); moderately anti-Russian (Latvia and Romania); anti-Russian (Estonia); strongly anti-Russian (Lithuania and Poland). This classification, despite its inability to perfectly reflect international political dynamics, serves as the dependent variable in the following statistical examination. Values on the scale are assigned for the purpose of further quantitative research.

4. Explanatory Variables of the Variety of CEE Approaches

Historical experiences

History of mutual relations plays a serious role in contemporary foreign policy, since it is difficult to overcome long-term grievances and resentments. The most memorable for CEE are certainly cases of the Soviet brutality during 1939-1941 occupations in Baltic countries and Poland. Some concerning disputes over history are also observable in CEE regarding 1944-1945 "liberation" by the Soviet forces in Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia⁶. Croatia and Slovenia as the part of Yugoslavia were the only CEE countries without direct contact with the Red Army. According to the above depiction the variable is operationalized on the scale 0-2 with 2 for strongest grievances, 1 for late World War 2 controversies and 0 for no direct resentments over modern history.

Proximity

Geographic factors make strong impact on international security (e.g. Levy & Thompson, 2010). Although geography allows to apply various variables for the purpose of statistical research, in the case of CEE countries and Russia only two seem to offer interesting insight into security relations: proximity and distance. Geographic proximity, in other words: direct neighborhood, draws particular attention of strategists. The four following CEE countries have direct land borders with Russia: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. A dummy variable is applied accordingly.

Distance

The purpose of taking into consideration the second geographic variable is to acquire broader knowledge than the proximity dummy variable can deliver. Distance between capital cities has been already widely applied to statistical research (Gleditsch, n.d.). This variable is worth using for additional verification of counterbalancing theories. The following features are observable among CEE countries: Baltic states' capitals are located below 1,000 km from Moscow; Poland's and Romania's between 1,000 and 1,500 km; capitals of the other CEE countries over 1,500 km. The ordinal 1-3 scale reflects this division.

Military power

Conceivably, having stronger armed forces could encourage governments to conduct hardline foreign policies. The operationalization consists in extracting data on military personnel and defense budgets (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2022) and then grouping countries into: those with 4-7 thousand troops, annual spending 200-700 million USD: Estonia, Latvia and Slovenia, additionally Lithuania with 14 thousand but budget of only 0.35-1 billion USD; 10-20 thousand, 0.83-2.5 billion USD: Croatia, Hungary and Slovakia, additionally Bulgaria with 24-28 thousand but of only 0.63-1.8 billion USD; then individually Czechia: 20-27 thousand, 1.6-2.9 billion USD; Romania: 65-69 thousand, 2.3-4.2 billion USD; and Poland: more than 98 thousand, 8-13 billion USD. Values are assigned according to the 1-5 ordinal scale which is needed to cover the great variety of CEE countries' military power.

Russian minority

Common speculations on potential Russia's attacks on regions with dominantly Russian-speaking populations: Narva in Estonia (Berman, 2014) and Daugavpils in Latvia (Duxbury, 2022) encourage to examine this variable. The size of the Russian minority, compared with country's population, can be operationalized by creating a 1-3 ordinal scale in which the first group consists of Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia with the number of Russians below 1% of population; the second is Lithuania with 5%; and the third contains Estonia and Latvia with as much as 25%. Values are assigned accordingly.

Economic problems

The annexation of Crimea took place in the end stage of the period of serious economic problems in Europe. Numerous CEE countries suffered economically due to the global financial crisis 2008 and the subsequent

Eurozone crisis. From 2014 onwards, governments still remained uncertain about economic forecasts, despite observable improvements in the economic situation. Economic problems are complicated, but the variable can be operationalized in a simplified version. The starting point is IMF direct assistance lent only in case of potentially destructive financial crises: Stand-By Arrangement received by Hungary, Latvia and Romania (International Monetary Fund, n.d.). This is operationalized by a dummy variable. However, some countries such as Estonia resigned from IMF loans because of selected sectors' robustness, but still their economic situation was persistently difficult. Another method of assessing this factor is the overall GDP size, in this case compared between 2008 and 2014, i.e., in the period of global crisis and Eurozone crisis—from 2015 onwards prosperity in the Eurozone stimulated higher growth in the entire EU. According to the World Bank (2022) between 2008 and 2014 the economy of Croatia, Latvia and Slovenia suffered from long-term recession, the economies of Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania and Romania experienced stagnation, the economy of Slovakia grew by 8% and Poland achieved overall 18% of growth. Values on the scale between -1 and 2 are assigned accordingly. Thus the economic factor is scrutinized by two variables to obtain a broader picture.

Energy supply from Russia

The problematic of energy dependence is much more complicated. For instance, countries can re-export resources of Russian origins. Also, some resources are considered critical for specific economic sectors such as gas for heating in some economies. Nonetheless, assessing contemporary dependence of an energy market can be simplified by focusing on two key factors: imports of gas and oil. For the purpose of further simplification this is operationalized as a combination of both factors (scale 0-2) based on data extracted from European Commission (Eurostat, n.d.): a country is given 1 if imported over 50% of gas from Russia; if below 50%, 0 is assigned. The same pattern is used for oil. Then both values are summed to obtain a 0-2 scale.

Civilizational division

The idea of civilizations as a key identity factor attracted public attention in numerous CEE countries (Guzzini ed., 2013), therefore it is worth adding it as a dummy variable: Bulgaria and Romania as dominant Orthodox Christian countries, and other CEE states as belonging to the Western civilization.

5. Results of the Research

As table 2 shows, the strongest correlations are related to proximity with Russia and distance between CEE capital cities and Moscow. These correlations are statistically significant and reflect counterbalancing tendencies of Russia's closest neighbors. Historical grievances and the size of Russian minorities are second strongest. However, excluding Hungary, historical grievances become the strongest factor of anti-Russian policies. This goes along with intuitive links between neighborhood and historical conflicts. It may be realized that proximity and historical grievances affect assertiveness and counterbalancing strategies towards Russia only in combination with relatively secure position in NATO. Own military power, as table 2 demonstrates, provides CEE countries with less self-confidence, which is reflected in weak correlation of this variable. A much stronger, medium correlation of the size of Russian minorities is puzzling. One may say that the presence of a large minority discourages from anti-Russian policies to avoid various types of Russian interventionism. However, correlations indicate different impact: the larger Russian minority, the more eagerness to pursue anti-Russian policies. It is noticeable that the distribution of Russian nationals is also strongly correlated with geographic closeness to Russia, which sheds more light on the result. Another important explanation regards the limited political inclusion of Russian speakers in Estonia and Latvia, which, in turn, restrains their influence on both countries' policies.

Table 2. **Correlations between CEE policies and analyzed variables**

Historical experiences	0.540*
Proximity	0.824**
Distance	-0.808**
Military power	0.251
Russian minority	0.495
Economy (IMF aid)	-0.166
Economy (GDP growth)	0.393
Energy dependence	-0.011
Civilizational division	0.045
Historical experiences (Hungary excluded)	0.871**

*p <0.1 **p<0.01

Correlations with the use of both economic variables: IMF assistance and GDP size are statistically not significant, but they still bring interesting results. Both correlations somewhat support the intuitive belief that countries with a better economic position are more assertive towards Russia, and, conversely, that accommodation results from material reasons, not only from the intention of threat reduction. Detailed studies on individual CEE countries could deliver in-depth knowledge on how exactly economic changes affect foreign and defense policies. Contrary to expectations, dependence upon Russian energy resources does not correlate with responses to the Russian expansion. The above research does not answer, however, the question on the reversed causation in a processual way: if decreasing dependence correlates with growing assertiveness towards Russia. This calls for further scrutiny.

The above research also challenges the idea of huge impact of civilizational divisions of international relations, which is still observable in political discourse in some CEE countries. There is nothing about correlation between belonging to either Western or Orthodox Christianity and approaches to Russia's expansion. Apparently, popular beliefs on civilizational divisions need revision.

Conclusions

CEE countries responded to Russia's open expansion with a variety of policies, which is commonly known. The ambition of this article was to carefully analyze each country's policies, to model the scale showing the spectrum of approaches and finally to obtain general explanatory variables for the entire CEE. The results demonstrate that the main challenger to the historical factor of relations was Hungary. Other CEE countries conducted their policies along with historical and geographic patterns. The novelty of the article is gathering CEE as a European subregion which recently has not been scrutinized from the perspective of foreign policies. To my knowledge this is the only article which discusses CEE responses to the Russian limited expansion in Ukraine starting with the annexation of Crimea but prior to the 2022 invasion. The originality lies in the application of the quantitative method in comparative perspective.

The article enriches the realist approach to International Relations in numerous ways. First, it delivers another evidence that geographic proximity in a specific region strongly correlates with tendencies in counterbalancing. Second, it challenges the intuitive thinking that small states avoid

confrontational policies and that power itself determines governments with tendencies in foreign and defense policies. Though Lithuania's and Estonia's assertiveness towards Russia requires in-depth studies, at this stage it is safe to say that small states, if secured by stronger alliances, can pursue confrontational policies similar to medium-sized powers. The article also sheds light on interrelated issues such as the practice of multilateral alliances whose members still vary in their strategies to a growing external threat.

The above results partially challenge Ross's (2006) conclusion that secondary states prefer accommodation. Nearly half of CEE countries chose limited counterbalancing as response. Among them accommodation was correlated with, presumably, the perception of Russia as a minor threat, which was shaped greatly by geographic distance and limits in historical resentments. Silva II's (2022) diagnosis on the variety of CEE policies is largely confirmed by the article, whereas his conclusions on Atlanticism and Europeanism as major causes of that variety are neither confirmed nor challenged. In practice, pro/anti-Russian policies in an observably polarized European system correspond with (inversely) anti/pro-US approaches. This is an important methodological problem of causation between two independent variables versus constitution by which two variables undergo mutual co-creation. Also, Silva II examined the period of 2009-2018 which regards the less polarized European system. Perhaps the higher level of the Russia's expansion 2014 onwards transformed the logic of foreign policy orientations into the more polarized one.

The above study indicates some directions of further research. The case of Hungary suggests to verify explanatory paths of political leadership affecting a dominant in-country ideology and collective identity. Further, alliances as preconditions of balancing/non-balancing strategies would require studies, in particular, in the context of the NATO eastern flank. Since the article summarizes each country's approach to Russia in an eight-year period, other periodization can be applied, for instance, to verify CEE countries' immediate reactions to Russia's aggressive steps. A processual approach could be also useful to scrutinize how CEE countries responded to one another's decisions. Finally, because the article is focused on the Russia's expansion prior 2022, the study of 2022 shifts in CEE policies is badly needed.

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Notes

¹ Although concessions can be framed as unreciprocated accommodation (Azubuike, 2006).

² Who rely on the USA as security provider, opposite to 'Europeanist' who seek for security in European integration.

³ For instance, Poland intended to create the Three Seas Initiative also to reduce Russian influences in the region, but there is no evidence that all its participants shared that purpose.

⁴ The analysis of corollaries suggests that the growth of defense budgets in years 2014-2016 reflected mainly the anxiety in result of the annexation of Crimea and the Donbas war. The growth in 2017-2020 could be additionally explained by US pressure under Trump. Further contextual factors are considered in the section of CEE policies' description.

⁵ Notably, Hungary is the only CEE country classified as "Trojan Horse" in the EU by Orenstein and Kelemen (2017).

⁶ Some acts of brutal violence occurred also in Hungary, 1956, and Czechoslovakia during the 'Prague Spring', 1968, but they did not make the impact on historical evaluations comparable with the Baltic countries and Poland.

⁷ Contrary to the next group, Lithuania did not own multiple-role combat aircraft, which also indicates its minor combat capabilities.