

CENTRAL EUROPE AFTER THE WAR IN UKRAINE: CONCLUSIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

The influence of the war in Ukraine on Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is paradoxical and the final rating of how much 'positive' and how much 'negative' it brings highly depends on very subjective ideological or even emotional factors.

Dr. Jakub Korejba

Non-Resident Fellow, Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM)

The ongoing war is changing not only bilateral relations between Russia and Ukraine, but the whole architecture of relations in Central and Eastern Europe. The outcome of this conflict as well as conclusions drawn (or not) from it, are already changing the region as well as its role in the international system. The war is far from a formal military termination but the overall political outcome, its territorial and demographic framework already emerges. It is already quite evident what kind of country will Ukraine be after the war. A demolished, depopulated, internally unstable and externally vulnerable one. And therefore the question is how the existence and functioning of this new, post-war Ukraine will influence its neighbors and reshape its immediate Western neighborhood.

The influence of the war in Ukraine on Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is paradoxical and the final rating of how much 'positive' and how much 'negative' it brings highly depends on very subjective ideological or even emotional factors. Every single change caused by the war both inside Ukraine and in its relations with external partners has two sides; both of them influence the situation parallelly and it often depends on the interests or a taste of the observer which of them shall be qualified as a progress or a regress in comparison to the *status quo ante bellum*. Ukraine changed a lot during last two years and the fact that Ukraine changed, changed the whole region around it. However, the essence of the paradox is

that all shifts that happen in the short term only confirm the existence of very traditional issues that the CEE countries face at least for last few centuries of modernity if not since the very beginning of their statehood. As the prince Fabrizio Salina, the hero of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's "The Leopard" famously said: "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change." For the CEE, this conflict revealed and confirmed several phenomena, which contain an internal dialectics: the long-term consequences are contradictory with short-term ones and vice-versa.

The Legal Aspect

From the point of view of international legal order, in the course of the war, the sovereignty of Ukraine was confirmed, but its territorial integrity was not. This is true not only for the aggressor but for the other major international actors, both states and organizations. Neither great powers nor the UN, EU or NATO were ready to defend the territorial order of Eastern Europe based on the principles they formally follow and protect. During the war, no Western power seen as a guarantor of stability was ready to put the question of Ukrainian territorial integrity in a principal way. This demonstration confirms a precarious position that was traditionally true for Central Europe. All the CEE nations hoped that this



vulnerability came to an end when they joined NATO and the EU. In fact, once again, Central Europe finds itself in the quality of “the second-category” Europe, where the law of force is still predominant on the force of law. Despite the declared principles, from the point of view of the West, if a conflict appears in practice, until American, German or French territory is not affected, the question of the legality of use of force in international relations remains open. What is more from the point of view of practical difference between the subject and the object of international relations is that Ukrainian territory is a price which major players pay Moscow for remaining a ‘constructive’ partner helpful in keeping global stability. The fact that the war did not destroy the Ukrainian statehood is good news for other CEE countries but the fact that international community is not ready to keep its borders where they legally are tells a sad story about double standards. If Ukrainian territorial integrity may be put into question today, the Polish or Lithuanian one may be tomorrow, when the global calculation changes in a way that the West will consider it a rational deal with another revisionist player. From the point of view of CEE countries, Vladimir Putin perceives them as Moscow’s “zone of privileged interests” or simply a buffer zone between Russia and the West. This means that the international status of their territory is not absolutely guaranteed by the existing system and their sovereignty is not equal to other Western countries. Therefore, they remain (or at least feel that they remain) an object of a

game between great powers. As Yulia Tymoshenko famously said in another context, “if something is forbidden but you really want it – it’s possible.”

The war confirmed the fact that the CEE countries face the problem of uncertain status of their territorial integrity. This is nothing new for the states and nations living between Russia and Germany for more than a millennium. It is simply contradictory to what the CEE nations were told by the Western partners after the end of the Cold War. Ukraine’s integrity was guaranteed by the Budapest Memorandum signed in 1994 by Russia, Great Britain and the USA. Putting aside the formal status of this document (which is not an international treaty), as well as its tactical utility for the signers, from the point of view of Ukraine and all other CEE countries, its political sense was clear: the West outstretched its

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standards of democracy, human rights, market economy and rule of law beyond the Iron Curtain into the zone that was previously given to Moscow in Yalta for its exclusive management. The civilizational attractiveness of the USA and EU, from the Central European perspective, is not based on the fact that they represent an ideal social and economic model -which they do not - but on the fact of cooptation to the political entity inside which the logics of force and domination is no more actual as an instrument of conflict solution between the states. And, this shall be true not only for internal relations among the member-states but also for an external threat: as all CEE countries naively thought in the CEE for last thirty years, EU and NATO countries do not fight each other and protect each other from others.

The Ukrainian war and Western reaction to it confront the CEE countries with two fundamental questions: Where the West ends and how much West is there in the East of Europe? Russia's response to those questions is as simple and straight as it was formulated in Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's ultimatum in December 2021; the former Soviet republics are not the West, but the Russian zone of influence and the former Warsaw Pact states are neither East nor the West, but a buffer zone. And, Moscow is serious about making this idea real and about institutionalizing it as a legitimate element of the global order. That is to say: formally accepted by other great powers as the element of the world order. The CEE countries also have a clear idea; they reject this postulate as a whole and the fierce determination of the Ukrainian nation to defend its state is the best proof of it. But the readiness of the West to accept the durable violation of territorial integrity of Ukraine - as well as Moldova, Georgia and Azerbaijan for over three decades - confirms the fact that in the CEE, the application of general rules and values of the West formally confirmed in NATO's and EU's documents is limited by the political interests of main powers and highly depends on the actual state of their relations with Moscow. If a rule universally accepted among Western states is not applicable to Ukraine, this may mean two things; either the principle is not a principle or Ukraine is not perceived as Europe. Without a firm and practical confirmation of those rules, none of the CEE countries is sure not to find itself one day in Kiev's skin.

The Strategic Aspect

From the point of view of strategic consciousness and security planning, the war in Ukraine confronted the CEE countries with a situation, which is new in the short perspective but very traditional in the long perspective. Central Europe has to accept the fact, that a danger of a real, kinetic - and not only a hybrid - war is not a hypothetical scenario, but a realistic possibility. This fact marks the end of the Fukuyama's "end of history" at least in this specific region; for the last three decades, the security was perceived as granted, as a common good that comes to the region together with the Western influence and is formally confirmed by the presence of NATO and EU as the institutional confirmation of belonging to the Western world. Logically, all the benefits coming from this civilizational affiliation and particularly, security from external threats were taken as assured by the fact of being a part of those institutions. In this sense, the Ukrainian war and the way that the West, who is a donor of security for the CEE, behaved marks the end of the utopia; the West did not use its power to prevent the war in this specific region, and after it failed to prevent the conflict, it did not show the political will and technical capabilities to win it in the sense of defending both the values it formally stands for and its geopolitical zone of influence: the territory of a country, that is Ukraine, that declares its eagerness to join the West and develop according to the Western model. The general conclusion coming from the stance of the West during this conflict is that either the Western values are not what they are declared to be or Ukraine is not perceived as the West in the sense of the place where those values shall be defended. As a result, the recipients of the Western-guaranteed security are thus confronted with the question to what extent they are perceived by the donors of security as the recipients. What will the 'older partners' do if a military threat to their territorial integrity and sovereignty materializes itself one day? The simple fact that this question arises marks the end of the post-soviet period of history where the fact that CEE belonged to NATO and EU was considered as sufficient to prevent them from military threat and it brings the region back to its traditional position of a buffer zone in between Russia and the West. Not a part of the West, but a space having a different strategic status than its 'real' elements. Because security is not only the lack of an objective danger but also a lack of a subjective feeling of being in danger.

The obvious response to the security dilemma of the CEE countries is that from the perspective of global players from among the NATO and EU member states, stability is more important than values and that there exist imaginable circumstances in which the leaders of NATO and EU will see a deal with Moscow on global issues more important than the defense of principles in Central and Eastern Europe. If the Ukrainian border and some pieces of the territory are accepted as an object of bargain to be

exchanged for peace and stability, this means, that borders and territorial sovereignty in this region are not any more a part of a 'package' that the West offers to the CEE. Nothing prevents Russia to use the same argument it uses to justify its violation of Ukrainian border and the annexation of Ukrainian territory again. The fact that the West decided not to engage in defending the territorial order in Ukraine reveals the reality that the CEE remains a Western object of the global power games with other major partners, in this case, Russia. Otherwise, if the territorial question in the CEE was definitely closed, the West would use its potential to keep the borders where they were before February 2022. To keep Russia constructive on a global stage, the West permits Moscow to be destructive on a regional stage and this brings the CEE countries back to the situation of pre-1991, a very traditional one, that its nations faced for at least last three centuries, since the moment when Peter the First declared Russia an empire and launched its march westwards.

The fatalistic nature of the security paradox that the CEE countries face consists of the fact that the West needs Russia to be weaker on the global level and to achieve it, it is ready to see Russia stronger - or at least bigger in a territorial sense - on a regional level, meanwhile, for the CEE, the calculation is reverse. The global power games between the US, China and Russia do not concern those countries unless they find reflection in a geopolitical bargaining that changes the strategic reality in Central and Eastern Europe. Therefore, the paradoxical outcome of the war in Ukraine is that while Russia is losing its overall strategic, economic, financial and moral potential globally, it becomes stronger regionally; in terms of the size of its territory and the military capacities it mobilized in the proximity of the CEE, in terms of the war-time economy that produces more low-cost tactical warfare apt for a local war with one of the neighboring countries, and also in terms of the ideological mobilization of the Russian society persuaded that not only Ukraine, but Poland and the Baltic States are an aggressive expository of the "Washingtonian Politburo" and thus a legitimate target of Russian 'counterattack' measures. From the point of view of the CEE, the fact that Russia is at the same time losing its high-tech strategic potential designed to fight a global war does not change the balance.

The war in Ukraine demonstrated the fact that Russia not only has its own vision of international order in the CEE: post-Soviet states as its exclusive zone of strategic responsibility and former Warsaw Pact states as a demilitarized buffer zone. Additionally, it became clear that under certain circumstances, it is ready to make it real by military measures. None of the CEE countries by itself, as well as all of them theoretically blocked together do not dispose of a military potential sufficient to win a kinetic confrontation with Russia and thus, their sovereignty and territorial integrity depend on the Western guarantees. None of them wants to become an

object of the bargain between the West and Russia in a way that Ukraine became one. The essence of the dissonance between the CEE and the rest of the West is that for the West, the cost of the conflict in Eastern Europe is negotiable, while for the concerned countries it is not. As the strategic 'social contract' between the CEE and the West was broken, there is rising awareness that the only way to securitize borders and sovereignty is not the Article 5 of the Washington Treaty but their own military potential large enough to make the cost of a potential war unacceptable for Moscow. Building such a potential will require to break the social contract inside concerned countries; to keep armies large and to buy new equipment will require a significant and long-term re-allocation of capital from the social-oriented sectors of economy towards the military. The economic miracle of certain CEE countries during last three decades was to a large extent sponsored by Western firmness and Russian weakness. None of them is true anymore and thus, the outsourcing of the security issues is not possible in the coming years. Building a strategic sufficiency in a regional dimension is possible but will have a price and there is no certitude that a social and political consensus in this domain will be reached, both inside the CEE countries and between them.

The Economic Aspect

The influence of the war on CEE economies once again shows a paradoxical outcome where the short-term effects contradict the long-term ones. On the one hand, the influx of a well-educated, skillful, motivated and easily integrable Ukrainian work force permits to fill the demographic gap that all the CEE societies struggle with and postpone the otherwise inevitable discussion on the mass immigration from non-European directions. On the other hand, the transformation of Ukraine into a quasi-failed state - and certainly into a one economically and socially incapable of delivering basic public goods to its own population - and the territorial advance of Russia westwards confront the CEE with long-term consequences. The non-questionable basic long-term objective of the CEE states is to fill the civilizational gap between the national economies and the rest of the West,

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which requires developing faster than the Western average. For the last three decades, that was possible due to the very low security risk. However, the war in Ukraine and its outcome raise the question of who will invest in the buffer zone that may any day transform into a frontline.

Keeping the economic attractiveness of the CEE requires a durable stability between the West and Russia but reaching such a stability requires a compromise with Russian demands. Making Russia weaker requires prolonging the war, but in the same time, the prolongation of the war undermines the stability and thus makes the Western investments into the region unlikely. This security trap implies an economic stalemate that will keep the CEE countries' development limited and thus not let to catch up the civilizational gap with the West. If Russia is not strategically defeated and, as a result of the war, it gains control over a part of Ukraine - which is already a fact materially and seems to be a politically accepted by the West - the post-war configuration will confront the CEE with a following dilemma: the cease-fire line will be perceived by Moscow as a temporary concession aimed as a measure to gain time and space to prepare a new phase of 'reintegration' of the rest of the post-Soviet space, and thus to a new conflict. The principle of inviolability of territorial status quo is already broken and therefore, if Ukraine is accepted by the West in borders other than the 1991 ones, any further changes may be accepted as well if the favorable circumstances happen to realize in future. This means that, from the

perspective of the CEE, any outcome other than the total restoration of Ukrainian sovereignty over its territory will be perceived as a tactical pause before a new war starts. And the region endangered by a potential conflict is not the one where an economic boom takes place.

Even if the territorial compromise with Russia is accepted as a price for a tactical peace and the required military adjustments are made, economically speaking, after the war, the Russian question mutes into a Ukrainian question. The long-term economic perspectives of the CEE countries will depend less on the exact territorial outcome of this war: on how big Ukraine will be territorially. They will depend more on the functional one that is to say on what will be the role of Ukraine in the Western system if any. The post-war Ukraine will represent a number of economic challenges, not only caused by the war damage, but first of all, because the West formally took responsibility for its future, declaring Ukraine an EU candidate state. The principal difference to the pre-war situation is that, in the course of this war, the Ukrainian question has become an internal one of the West and therefore, the problems of Ukraine have become the problems of the West, with major and long-term consequences, starting with Ukraine's immediate neighbors among EU member states. If Ukraine in its new territorial shape after the ceasefire with Russia is to have any chance to remain an independent state, it has to keep and enlarge its self-defense potential, which is impossible without a demographic reserve, which, in turn, is unrealistic to



ach, even without creating acceptable economic and social living conditions. The post-war Ukraine shall not only be a vitrine of a Western development model's superiority over the Russian one, but first and foremost, a country where Ukrainians will be willing to live and, if needed, a state and society they will be ready to defend.

Transforming Ukraine into a state close to European standards of governance and living was already a difficult task before the war, and now, as the hostilities are about to finish, the institutional and mental obstacles such as corruption, questionable property rights, selective rule of law and poor management will be multiplied by the demographic and infrastructural havoc. Ukraine, for a period still difficult to define in exact time frames will simply not be a country able to sustain itself. It will entirely depend on external funding and assistance. And this post-war reality will confront the CEE countries with a politically uneasy choice. The key question will be about how much means are they ready to divert from their own budgets as well as from the EU's funds to assist Ukraine. And this choice will have to be made in the situation where all of them are still underdeveloped and need assistance to catch up the gap between them and the rest of Europe. The other paradoxical aspect of the situation is the fact that the countries whose security is potentially the most endangered if Ukraine falls under the Russian dominance are at the same time the countries whose economy is the most endangered by Ukraine. Both in terms of the stability of their markets and the competition for the European financial redistribution. From the point of view of CEE countries, the aim of this war is not only to contain Russia without engaging into a direct kinetic conflict with Moscow, but to turn Ukraine into an economic asset. From this point of view, the convergence between Ukrainian economy and European standards shall happen before making the political decision of letting Ukraine into the common market, as it happened on their own long and difficult path of restructuration required by Brussels. On the other hand, Ukraine argues that it deserves the immediate access as a victim of Russian aggression and requires the integration without meeting common standards, as the reforms are impossible to carry out during the wartime. The tension between political and strategic objectives on one hand and the economic and social stability on the other creates a space of potential conflict between the CEE and the post-war Ukraine.

Up to now, the economic concessions such as opening the European market for Ukrainian agricultural production were seen and vastly accepted as a price for the victory over Moscow. However, since December 2022, Ukraine has not advanced on the frontline, the CEE's societies feel less and less committed to support Ukraine; if the commodity - the military victory - is not delivered by Kiev, than the price - the access to the market - is not seen as a price worth to be paid. This modified

attitude is very visible in the form of Polish farmers' protests against the presence of Ukrainian goods on the domestic market. In the CEE, and not only in Budapest, Ukraine is more and more seen as a European fare dodger, selling the Russian threat for European money. But, to keep this deal valid in the eyes of European taxpayers a military result shall be presented. The problem is that the result is not clear and it does not seem that it will be any time in a near future. The frontline stabilized itself and the actual territorial status quo will most probably be frozen and formalized by the ceasefire. From the European perspective, the service was delivered, the price was paid, and as there is no further production on the contractor's side, there would be no payment on the purchaser's side. Ukraine is definitely an important component of CEE's strategic depth, but at the end of the day, Ukrainians are first and foremost fighting for their own land and statehood, and if they cannot do more, no other nation will do that for them and instead of them.

The situation is very likely to get even more complicated when the cease-fire is reached and Ukraine has all its right to see the integration process accelerated, especially in terms of sharing the EU structural and development funds according to the currently existing criteria. This will provoke further tensions because even the richest region of Ukraine is poorer than the poorest Polish region, which means that from the CEE countries perspective, the European cake will shrink at their expense. As a result, if Ukraine is to keep its European prospect and be integrated into EU either the budget shall be dramatically expanded - and this immediately puts the question of the Ukrainian contribution on the table - or the criteria have to be modified. The former solution implies the discussion on which EU members shall pay more to the common budget - those who are economically sustainable will do that or those, who are politically and strategically most interested in supporting Ukraine. The former solution implies another question: shall the rules be modified for all or only for Ukraine treated as a separated special case.

Conclusions

The most obvious outcome of this war is that the CEE countries were confirmed in their international status of being the part of the West. During the whole conflict Vladimir Putin respected the redline of not attacking the EU and NATO members' territories. At the same time, Ukraine was not confirmed as a part of the West. This is relatively good news, but the bad one is that in the foreseeable future, the CEE will remain the periphery of the West and will not move to its core. The borderline between the Western and Russian zones of influence will stay where it is with all strategic, political

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and economic consequences for the frontline countries. In this sense, seen in the historical context, the Ukrainian war did not bring anything new. It was not an order-changing conflict resulting in a new regional architecture. The already existing division between Central and Eastern Europe was once again confirmed; the former belongs to the West as it has been since roughly the 10th century, the latter's status, however, is to be determined in future.

At least a few times, this war could potentially escalate from a bilateral local one into a multi-lateral regional one, but both the West with a conscious approval of the CEE states and Russia decided it not to happen. This fact reflects the fact, that the borders between two big 'geopolitical' entities – the Western and the Russian one – are not incidental and reflect an actually existing and most probably durable power ratio between the two. The Russian territorial expansionism and Moscow's readiness to act as a revisionist power are not unexpected, at least for the CEE nations, but at the same time, its failed attempt to suppress the Ukrainian statehood or at least take control over the half of its territory confirm the fact that the buffer zone between the two is relatively stable. The West has technically enough potential to defend territories of the EU and NATO member states but not to enlarge it. As a result of the war, still the 82% of Ukrainian territory is not controlled by Russia which gives the CEE countries time and space to feel relatively comfortable. Even if the pessimistic scenario is one day realized, there is still a lot to do for the Russian army before it may even dream of taking Vilnius or Warsaw.

The other fundamental outcome of this war is that during the active phase of the conflict, the direct deal between Russia and the West at the expense of CEE's territorial or political rights did not happen neither in the continental format nor in the global one. From the CEE countries' perspective, this is a major fact, because the historical experience of those countries shows that Russia alone is not an existential threat to their sovereignty and it may only expand to the Central Europe if it finds an active cooperation or passive acceptance of major Western actors as it happened during the partitions of Poland, during the Vienna Congress in 1815, in 1939 and in 1945. If such a deal was not concluded now in the form of the West accepting the Lavrov's proposals presented in December 2021, it means, that in the eyes of the West,

Russia has no bargaining potential to transform Central Europe into a currency in its power games with other major powers. If Russia could do or refrain from doing something really important to the West in other regions or domains, there would surely be no hesitation in Washington, Paris or Berlin, as there was none in Tehran and Yalta. Moreover, Russia is perceived as a weak enough player to be quickly and easily isolated from European political and economic concert. And making Russia a non-factor in Europe, excluded from any discussions about European order is exactly what CEE countries wish and intend to do. The CEE's purpose vis-à-vis Russia is to put it behind a new Iron Curtain, but this time, finding themselves on the right side of it.

The isolation of Russia from Europe has consequences broader than regional. If the demarcation of the zones of influence is confirmed and the two entities do not perceive each other as potential partners - which was a fact between 1991 and 2022 - the idea of ideological and political convergence between Russia and the West has to be abandoned on both sides. This implies the end of the liberal dreams of seeing Russia as a part of a common axiological space and marks the end of 'the end of history' as Francis Fukuyama would formulate it. Russia will politically remain what it is – a semi-totalitarian personalistic regime – and the war in Ukraine only accelerated the already ongoing trend of suppression of everything that looked like the expression of Western values. The most probable practical reflection of this polarization will be the following: no westernization or regime change in Russia and, at the same time no reforms in (still existing) Ukraine. A kind of balanced result.

At the expense of hundreds of thousands of human lives and devastated territories, the regional order was confirmed; CEE countries were not attacked, Belarus was not incorporated and Ukraine was not suppressed as an independent state. Yes, it was divided and diminished but those divisions already existed before the active phase of conflict. In a wider sense, the actual frontline between Ukraine and Russia may be a response to where the West really ends. According to Zbigniew Brzezinski's qualification, Ukraine was an internally divided state and, for decades of the independence, the internal conflicts did not find an internal solution. The territorial division of Ukraine, which results from this war, obviously violates the international law and simple human morality, but it possibly reflects the actual balance of power, not only from the point of view of military potential, but also from the one of values of the civilizational choice.

As a result, the West lost its illusion of convergence with Russia, the CEE countries lost their illusion of Ukraine and Belarus repeating their own path of democratization, modernization and westernization and Russia lost its illusion of the imperial restoration. The civilizational border stays where it was two years ago and, indeed, for the last millennium.