Russia – Central Europe relations


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Part I: Decreasing Role of (Communism) History
I.1. Troubled past

CEE perception:

1944-45 – Soviet occupation + gradual Sovietization

   Heavy human and material losses, deportations, forced labor, etc.

1945/49-1989: national Communist regimes


RU perception

1944-45: Soviet Union liberated CEE

1945/49 – 1989: fruitful co-existence, progress
I.2.: ‘Inherited’ problems mostly settled

- Withdrawal of the Red Army
- Peaceful end of the Warsaw Pact
- Soviet state-debt settled
- Restitution of confiscated artifacts: minor progress
- Joint discussion of common history has started
- Demographic element

Basis is present for normal interstate relations between CEE and RU.
Part II: Security and defense: prevailing mistrust
II/1. Prevailing Russian mistrust

Russian pro- *status quo* agenda

Russia was strongly opposed to 1999 NATO enlargement... ...but finally digested it

(1999: Kosovo-crisis!)

Russia opposed the **missile defense system** to be stationed in Central Europe (PL, CZ, HU!)

On-going intensive RU intelligence activities: NATO, EU and business-related targets
II/2. Central Europe: NATO!

CE relies on NATO framework: low defense spendings, limited capabilities

Contribution to on-going NATO operations

Strongly Atlanticist foreign policies (Klaus? Orbán?)

Defense-related cooperation with Russia in NATO framework (+ police)
Part III: Foreign policy: from Mutual Ignorance to Cold Pragmatism
Asymmetric importance

Russia:

1997: the first-ever strategic document about Central Europe: already recognized the importance of CEE as future NATO and EU members!

2013: New Russian foreign Policy Concept: CE is not even mentioned! CE is important mostly due to its EU and NATO membership

Central Europe:

Relations with Russia is always foreign policy priority
III/2. Yeltsin-era

Intensive, often compensatory start: visit of Yeltsin, etc.

Generally low interest, and mutual ignorance

1997: the first-ever strategic document about Central Europe

Not much economic perspective

No RU minorities present

CE not unified: HU, CZ, PL: pro-European foreign policy vs. Mečiar’s Slovakia until 1998

Negative turn due to NATO-enlargement and Kosovo
III/4. Putin-era

More assertive RU foreign policy

Positive effects of 09.11 quickly fade away

Cooling down of relations from mid-2000s

NATO-Russia tensions

Assertive acquisition efforts

War in Georgia

CE’s engagement in the ‘color revolutions’ and the Eastern Partnership
III/5. Putin-era

Structural differences in CE foreign policies, defined mainly by the level of dependence on Russia

PL: political ambitions dominate over pragmatic interests

CZ: more value-oriented; cool CZ-RU political relations, but intensive trade and tourism

HU, SK: more pragmatism (energy dependence!), less values

In most cases these priorities prevail, regardless of the actual governments (exceptions: Mečiar, Kaczyński, + Orbán?)
Part IV: Business as (Should be) Usual
IV/1. Trade

Bilateral trade: strong Russian sufficit (to CE 90+ per cent oil and gas)

Strategic RU investments: repeated, but repelled efforts (except HU and the Paks-deal…)

Non-strategic investments: increasing activity

Purchase of Volksbank by Sberbank!
IV/2. Tourism and people-to-people contacts

Tourism: highly unbalanced: large inflow from RU, almost no tourism from CE.

Recent sharp decrease due to the crisis of RU tourism industry

Intensifying people-to-people contacts: education, business exchange, mixed marriages, etc.

The interest is present on both sides. BUT: growing concerns about RU soft power influence
Part V: The Ukraine crisis
V/1. CEE is divided

CE is strongly divided – Visegrad is unable to act

Proximity, minority issues:

**PL. HU, SK:** UA is direct neighbour, minority presence

**CZ:** no proximity, high number of UA guest workers,

**Geopolitical players vs. pragmatists**

**PL vs. CZ, SK, HU**

Varying contribution to NATO operations

Varying support to UA (from PL also military!)
V/2. RU policy: dominance of strategic interests

Importance of CEE for Russia: not *per se*, but as part of EU and NATO.

Strategic Russian interests about the West dominate over bilateral considerations. Co-ordinated, efficient Russian information warfare in all CEE states: fake news, propaganda, etc. Damage on bilateral relations is of secondary importance.

„Divide and rule“ game: CZ, SK, HU used to divide and weaken the EU and NATO. Existing dependencies are fully used as leverages.
V/3. Where do we go from here?

RU „divide and rule” game so far largely ineffective: Western influence over CEE is stronger.

- EU sanctions could not be stopped.
- NATO action could not be stopped.
- Support to Ukraine could not be stopped.

Compromised, badly planning CZ, SK, HU leaders will suffer, both in the West and in Moscow: loss of face, loss of credibility, loss of trust.

Lasting cool-down of RU-CEE relations is likely.
Thank you very much for your attention!

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