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**SECURITY CHALLENGES TO CENTRAL EUROPEAN BORDERING TERRITORIES:  
VIEW FROM THE TRANSCARPATIAN REGION OF UKRAINE**

Introduction

The borders of Central Europe have been determined by researchers, politicians and cultural workers in diverse ways at different periods of time. Even up till now they are elastic, particularly, taking into consideration various approaches employed for their demarcation: geographical, historical – cultural or political (geopolitical) ones.

We must mention that the **concept of Central Europe** was popularized in the second half of the XX century by Pjotr Vandysh (2004). He took into account the viewpoints of G. Konrad, M. Kundera, J. Siuch and described it as the “unfinished part” of the continent, the transition zone between the West and the East.

After World War II the notion of Central Eastern Europe was identified with European countries which were dependant on the USSR and were considered to be a part of “big” Eastern Europe, ruled by communist ideology. Nevertheless, Milan Kundera (1984) opposed the concept of “Central Europe” to another sub-region of CEE – “Eastern Europe”, represented by the Soviet Union – and this literary comparison became rather popular.

After the collapse of the USSR the discrimination of differences between Central and Eastern Europe became even more radical, not only because of social and political changes, but also due to the formation of new geopolitical divisions. Already at the beginning of 1990<sup>th</sup> the diplomacy of Western countries employed the term “Central Europe” to those former socialist countries which were not constituents of post Soviet space, and to the former republics – the notion “Eastern Europe” (Belorussia, Ukraine, Moldova), “Eurasia” (primarily, Russia).

## Ukraine's connection with Central Europe

In the 1990<sup>th</sup> there was a discussion held in Ukrainian culturological circles as to positioning Central Europe as the target of geopolitical development, cultural goalpost, the region, which can be supplemented by Ukraine, what is more, having many common historical traditions with the latter. What concerns western Ukrainian territories (Halychyna, Volyn, Bukovyna, Zakarpattia), the adherents of this theory never had any doubts as to their Central European identity. This has created a latent political project on the European integration of only those regions which are bordering on the EU. Unfortunately these ideas are being used by the radicals of Russian propaganda and several neighbouring countries at the times of modern Ukrainian crisis.

There is only one constructive idea in all these provocative assumptions: in fact, Ukrainian western bordering territories have more common unifying factors – humanitarian, economic, ethnic, cultural and educational ones – with central European countries, in particular with Poland, the Slovak Republic, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Romania – than the other regions.

First of all, Poland, Hungary, the Slovak and the Czech Republics have been members of the subregional international union “**Visegrad group**” (V-4) since 1991. Ukrainian politicians, public figures and scholars have been talking a lot about the need of association or membership in this organization. As the determination of the modern goal of the abovementioned group is not the aim of the present article, it should be mentioned that one of its initial goals, besides the convergence and integration with the European community, was the creation of additional security guarantees in the region. Except for military and political aspects, which were planned to be secured due to NATO membership, several other challenges and threats were taken into consideration, viewed as the ones which could be neutralized by means of less severe measures.

## Common threats to the Central Europe's stability

It should be added that the factor of integral Central European space determines the formation of common challenges to the region's security. One part of them is not visualized or not perceived in the capital cities. These threats may be most vividly traced in the Transcarpathian region of Ukraine, especially, taking into consideration the fact that it borders on or has close historical ties, as with the Czech Republic, with all of the abovementioned countries.

First of all, these are **ethnopolitical threats**, caused by the multiethnic population of the region, **energy dependence**, threats of **social economic peripherization** of Central European bordering territories, **informational influence** on the population, **different attitudes to Ukraine – Russia conflict**.

### Ethnopolitical threats

Central European countries are objectively interested in Ukraine's security (as the first rank neighbours) as well as economic partners (taking into account the problems of competition in other European sub-regions), and for the sake of increasing their influence in European politics. The V-4 countries, together with the Baltic ones, belonged to the group of states, supporting Ukraine in its European vector in 2010-2014 (conclusively, with certain warnings), regardless of obvious problems with democracy, absence of reforms in other spheres of life and corruption. Besides, during the period of the Revolution of dignity leaders of V-4, together with some other governments, acted as mediators between the authorities and the opposition.

In 2014 – at the beginning of 2015 members of V-4 supported territorial integrity of Ukraine in the context of the annexation of Crimea and war in Donbas. The countries of Visegrad group also acted as proponents of Kyiv's integration to European political and economic space in signing and ratifying the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU.

Central European countries provided technical and consulting support of Ukraine in the implementation of political, macroeconomic and sectoral reforms, in particular, what concerns the issues of decentralization and changes in the administrative territorial system, power supply and energy saving, support of small and medium business, setting of free trade regime with the EU and assistance to civil society. There are several grounds to claim that V-4 + format (i.e. participation of Ukraine to some initiatives) is the present stage key factor in saving the group as the vigorous regional union with common interests, taking into consideration heterogeneous tendencies present in the group. Indeed, it was quiet complicated to reach this consensus due to **differential factors**, the basic challenge to region's security.

Let us start by stating that the **ethnopolitical stability**, i.e. safeguarding sustainable relations among the countries, territories of which are inhabited by the same ethnic communities, is the element of international defense on the regional level. Doubts as to the frontier inviolability and sometimes even declarations of intentions to encroach

territorial integrity of the neighbouring country are explained by the politicians, who represent the “mother” country, chiefly by “ethnic injustice”.

The greatest challenge to maintain the existing status quo in Central Europe is the policy of Hungary, which follows – in the open official format – the rhetoric of protecting the interests of Hungarians, inhabiting the Slovak Republic, Romania, Ukraine and Serbia, and in the concealed one – the aspiration to unite Hungarian community within the territories, existing at the end of World War I, suggesting autonomy ideas for its implementation.

In its relations with neighbouring countries official Budapest holds to the set number of diplomatic theses and political priorities. In particular, it is specific about the need to protect the collective rights of Hungarians, living in other countries, providing the citizenship to those, who can prove their ethnic Hungarian origin, which means obtaining political rights; establishment as well as organizational and financial support of ethnic parties, claiming their representation in government bodies, including national parliaments and governments; propaganda of autonomy on the bordering territories, especially on the eve of elections.

In view of the fact that Transcarpathian region is inhabited by more than 150 thousand representatives of Hungarian community, Hungarian “soft expansion” of Ukraine has the same formats as in the case with Central European countries, such as the Slovak Republic and Romania. At the same time, taking into consideration the vulnerability of our country due to the military conflict with Russia, economic crisis, increase of social and psychological tension, resources and instruments to ruin the ethnopolitical stability are even more diverse. It is the establishment of Prytysianskyi autonomous district, which would be inhabited by 110-120 thousand ethnic Hungarians (Fidesz hu, 2014), Hungarian citizenship (80 thousand Ukrainian citizens), to obtain the latter, one must prove his/her Hungarian origin or the citizenship of close ancestors, language competence (Міхай Баєр, 2013); concession of political rights to Hungarians, living in other countries, in order to expand the electronic resource of the party in power FIDESZ, separatist tendencies, not concealed on the territory of Transcarpathia by the representatives of “Jobbik” party (Frank Markovic, 2014).

All these challenges to the ethnopolitical stability of Ukraine could have been considered not menacing if some Hungarian political forces did not support Russia in its military and political conflict from Ukraine. The representatives of the political party “Jobbik” acted as observer in March, May 2014 referendums, held in Crimea and Donbas. As stressed Frank Markovic (2014) the Prime Minister of Hungary V. Orban

declared compliance with the illiberal state model, established on the values of nationalism, factual approval of V. Putin's foreign policy, promulgation of the slogan about the "turn to the East" and open criticism of European sanctions against Moscow. At the same time, the pressure of Germany and the US, the position of European solidarity as to the elaboration of mutual sanctions politics against Russia and the aspiration to diversify the sources of raw materials supply made the politics of Hungary in 2015 more moderate and concurrent with the Brussels consensus.

Political Rusyns' movement is another concealed destabilizing factor of Ukrainian ethnopolitics of the last two decades. It is typical of Transcarpathian region and exists as such in the Slovak Republic and Poland, fitting into the model of official ethnopolitics. The abovementioned vector in Ukraine is supported by few people, using autonomist or separatist rhetoric due to various creeds. Senior citizens primarily believe that Transcarpathia has no prospects of its development as the constituent part of Ukraine and "Ukrainian project" as the whole, and thus, experience the need to seek support either from the neighbouring countries or from tolerant to Rusyns, Russia; others – pursue mercenary interests, in particular, the possibility of obtaining foreign financing, electoral support on the eve of election to Verkhovna Rada or local bodies by virtue of "separation" slogans. At the same time, low level of social welfare and malfunctioning of state structure in Ukraine potentially creates favourable socio-political background for the spread of slogans to expand power of self-government of Transcarpathia, in particular during the international crisis.

## Energy threats

Another threat for the Central European periphery is the dependence on external sources of **energy supply**, in particular, a rather significant one on Russian hydrocarbons. Transcarpathian region is the territory of Ukraine which had the last sections of "Druzhba" oil pipeline and "Urengoy-Pomary-Uzhhorod" gas pipeline built in the direction of Czechoslovakia and Hungary in Soviet times. Until 2014 these mains have been used only in the mode of forward flows to supply raw materials from the Russian Federation to European countries. At the same time in the winter of 2009, when during the so-called "Russia-Ukraine gas war" Slovak and Hungarian consumers experienced great inconveniences, whereas Russia, Ukraine and Central European countries exchanged mutual accusations as to mala fides in the supply or transit of gas, it became clear that the diversification of energy carriers is essential for the sustainable development

of economics and avoidance of geopolitical blackmail. The Slovak Republic post factum established the strategy of partial energy supply of Norwegian oil.

In 2014-2015, at the initiative of Ukraine, Poland, the Slovak Republic and Hungary established the reverse mode of gas supply to Ukraine, taking into account market differences in prices. The request of European Commission, in particular, Germany turned out to be the forcible argument to surmount the initial skeptical attitude of R. Fico' government to this project as to the unprofitable one and escalating the relations with Russia. Nowadays, the major part of gas supplies or one third of home demand of Ukraine is provided by "Vojany-Uzhhorod" section on the Ukraine-Slovakia border (Прем'єр Словаччини: 31 березня збільшусться потужність газопроводу «Ужгород -Вояни», 2015). Furthermore, the Slovak Republic is in fact interested in the supply of Russian raw materials to Europe and its domestic market through Ukraine and acts as Kyiv's ally in negotiations with Moscow. In January 2015 the Slovak Republic and Russia signed the agreement on the transit and supply of hydrocarbons by the "Druzhba" pipeline till 2029, the consequences of which may be perceived differently. It is impossible for the Slovak Republic to break its energy dependence on Russia in the mid-term prospective. It is the contract agreement on the supply of Russian nuclear fuel for the NPP "Mochovce", according Victor Kichak (2015), strategically important for the Central European region as the alternative energy source.

Hungary had the most critical position as to the gas collaboration with Ukraine, in particular, taking into consideration the leaning of Prime Minister V. Orban to V. Putin's "illiberal" regime, declared in spring 2014, anti-western and anti-European attitude, inherent to some part of the society. In autumn 2014 Hungarian company MVM signed the agreement on the storage of gas for "Gasprom" in its underground reservoirs (700 mln cubic meters), and immediately cut gas supply to Ukraine.

The mutual interest of Bratislava, Prague, Warsaw and Kyiv to form the regional energy hub during 2014 was not supported only by Budapest, due to its desire to conserve Russian gas in the reservoirs and construct "South Stream" pipeline. However, preparation to the construction of Eastring pipeline, which had to join Ukraine and Turkey through the territory of the Slovak Republic, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria testifies the understanding of Hungarian party of the importance of diversification of the sources and ways of energy sources' transportation. In early June Ukrainian and Hungarian operators were the first to sign the agreement on the connection of cross-border pipelines (Україна та Угорщина об'єднали транскордонні газопроводи: що це означає і чому це не вигідно Росії, 2015), especially in the context of the functioning

of Energy union in Europe. It should be mentioned that in 2014, for the first time in many years, Norway obtained the status of the biggest oil trader with European countries and was only 4 points behind Russia in gas supplies (Nórsko predstihlo Rusko v dodávkach plynu do západnej Európy, 2015).

## **Economic threats**

Region's **economic security** is threatened by the possibility of further **peripherization** of Central European bordering territories which connect the regions of Poland, the Slovak Republic, Hungary, Romania and Ukraine, having the lowest indices of social and economic development on the national level.

Low rates of living standards and people's development may provoke further increase of unemployment, crime, in particular cross-border one, labor migration to other parts of Europe, decrease of region's educational potential, which in due time will lead to the conservation of retardation, low level of perception of new administration standards in the region, challenges to creativity.

Modern history of economic collaboration in the region, unfortunately, is also characterized by accusations of unfair competition, lack of desire to participate in mutual projects, opacity in the promulgation of the information about investment opportunities. For instance, it is about recent food "wars" with Poland and the accusations of Czech and Slovak media in dark public relations against Polish producers. Importance of the abovementioned issues is testified by the statistic data, according to which, for example, Polish food products constitute more than one third of the Slovak food import.

The abovementioned problem has not arisen incidentally; throughout all the post Soviet period target countries and bordering regions competed for the markets, taking into account the similar economics structure and lack of investment at different times, however, this rivalry was not beneficial to any of the parties. After the financial crisis in 2008 and, in particular, in the light of modern "Ukrainian crisis", it is obvious that Germany has become the dominant power in the centre of Europe and "small" states may collectively provide the opportunity to draw German investment in the framework of the so-called "German-Visegrad industrial alliance", and take part in its infrastructural projects, having created the Central European business and industrial platform within the scope of V-4.

Meanwhile, Central European elites in their V-4 format dialogues after the financial crisis in 2008 became aware of the need to unite the resource, economic and creative potential of the territory and population, which can secure competitive ability compared to other European regions. Besides energy ties, there is one more aspect to be analyzed, it is the financial benefit from joint enterprises, clusters, other network forms of collaboration, especially with Ukrainian partners, that will be able to stand competition with other European counterparts due to free trade zone expansion. This, in its turn, requires opening new and increasing the capacity of existing check points on common borders, the development of transport network, including trans-European corridors, the implementation of new projects in the sphere of new creative economics, aggravation of competition to obtain international investments, in particular, under the conditions of the flight of Russian capital.

However, this synergy reach is only a prospective, especially, taking into consideration the necessity to elaborate the joint strategy on updating region's economic structure. This aim is subjected by the platform of formation of "Digital Visegrad, considering the first positive experience of start ups in the sphere of information technologies in the V-4 countries. Given the fact that Europe has not been successful in the world "digital" competition yet, there is a chance to occupy the niche, ironically enough, by the Central European companies (Creating a digital agenda for Visegrad, 2015).

### Informational threats

Informational influence on the citizens of Central Europe and western regions of Ukraine, exercised by foreign agents to promote their geopolitical interests constitutes another challenge to the security of the society and countries of the region. It is the Russian propaganda, spread through the media, nongovernmental organizations and educational establishments which obtain financial help and career prospects. They use various starting points of psychological manipulation, conscience influence, such as latent disagreements between various ethnic groups, historic stereotypes, common state memories, Slavophile or Eurasian (in the case with Hungary) attitudes. Arguments are introduced to nourish the anti-American, anti-NATO, anti-global, anti-liberal and anti-European attitudes. On the other hand, Russia is presented as the country, having its own, individual action plan, as the only country capable of countervailing the USA. Besides, only Moscow preserves orthodox Christian values, and given the fact, is closer to European civilization than it may seem at first sight. They accentuate Russia's



independence on international financial organizations and its ability to fight economic and cultural globalization.

Taking into consideration modern facilities to manipulate public opinion, in particular, using the media, it is quite easy for the interested parties to create the favourable environment for the spread of separatist ideas, skeptical attitudes to neighbours' positive intentions, and doubts as to the need to preserve Central European solidarity in the face of numerous challenges.

### Different positions of Central European Countries in Ukrainian crisis as the threat to the Regional Security

We may consider **divergent attitudes of politicians and societies of Central European countries to Ukraine-Russia conflict** challenge to region's security. Regardless of the fact that all of them publicly supported Ukraine's territorial integrity in their reactions to the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation and intensification of hybrid war in Donbas.

Thus, Hungary, apart from its latent ethnopolitical disagreement with Ukraine, maintains significant economic ties with the Russian Federation not only in power engineering, but also in other economic spheres. Despite its economic dependence on Germany and consequently on the position of Berlin as to "Ukrainian crisis", major Hungarian political figures employ illiberal and anti-American rhetoric, search for individual development model and, thus, show demonstrative esteem of V. Putin's political regime (Frank Markovic, 2014).

Somewhat controversial in its relations with Ukraine, particularly, Ukraine-Russia conflict, is the policy of Slovakia, due to the discrepancy in the foreign policy attitudes between the Prime Minister R. Fico, who is in favour of pro-Russian projects and President A. Kiska, manifesting solidarity with the European position. This, evidently, not pro-Russian political position stands on the economic grounds. The main partner of the Slovak Republic is Germany (the country mounts about 500 German enterprises, employing around 90 thousand people). The given fact influences the dependence of the country's foreign policy attitudes upon German strategies; in particular, what concerns Ukraine. Furthermore, Bratislava is the ally of Kyiv in the energy projects, as it is interested in the preservation of Russian gas transit through Ukraine or in the establishment of projects, alternative to Russian ones, pipelines, bypassing Slovak territories. Meanwhile, the abovementioned energy dependence upon Moscow, the somewhat

irrational desire to maintain independent foreign policy and electoral expectations have led to the actions, testifying vulnerability of Bratislava's security (May and June 2015 visits of R. Fico to Moscow) (PM Fico in Moscow: an unforced error?, 2015).

Similarly to Slovakia, some Czechs share pro-Russian attitudes, elucidated by traditional Russophile, Pan-Slavism, Russian capital, considerable amounts of biased internet sites and analytical centers as well as economic ties with the Russian Federation. Support or neutral attitude to Russia's position in the question of Ukraine is the marginal attitude of active public society members and politicians, testified by demonstrations against President M. Zeman, who has openly reproached the development of Ukraine in the post Maidan period and called the situation in Donbas the "civil war".

Poland had the most uncompromising attitude to the events in Crimea and Donbas as the annexation and military aggression and supported the imposing of sanctions on Russia. In spring 2015 political leaders of Poland, in particular, their President B. Komorowski confirmed that the economic sanctions tool proved to be effective; the Prime Minister E. Kopacz emphasized that there were no grounds to cancel them. Simultaneously, there are excessive expectations for Warsaw to take a more radical position in the conflict with Russia than Germany and France. In its short-term relations with Ukraine, Warsaw is the locomotive of help in the spheres demanding fast response (energy, army needs, help to migrants from Crimea and Donbas) and the establishment of long-term projects, programmes, forums on collaboration in the framework of Association Agreement and Eastern Partnership.

Differentiation of political positions of Central European countries as to Ukrainian question is explained by V-4 search for unifying factors, taking into consideration discrepancies in economic and ethnopolitical interests and the lack of a clear integration platform, in particular, on society level. This feebleness and sometimes lack of sense as to supporting specific collaboration format proved to be another reason of Central European capitals' inertia in setting their position as to Ukrainian crisis. Eventually, the factor of the immediate vicinity with Ukraine of three V-4 members and their close ties, especially in the spheres of energy, trade and logistics, forced the Visegrad group to set its priority in security promotion for its eastern neighbour. Besides, taking into account the dominance of Normandy format countries and the USA in the solution of military-political aspects of Ukrainian crisis, V-4 undertook commitments to provide help in the implementation of sectoral reforms which is the primary interest of Germany and other EU leaders.

## Conclusion

Summarizing security challenges, observed in the Central European region, it should be mentioned that the leading ones lie in the irrational competition for resources, “attention” of world leaders or the prestige in politics, therefore relations agenda is continuously supplied by controversial issues of historical past and ethno-cultural differences.

One of the crucial tasks, especially due to escalating Russian propaganda and the spread of Euro-skeptical attitudes, is to overcome this self-centered approach to the development of relations in the region. To consolidate fragile Central European integrity, the previously declared projects of Central European values’ promotion, such as communication channels, educational establishments and cultural initiatives must be implemented.

Moreover, Visegrad countries are the geographical bridge between the Baltic region and the Balkans, their union “Eastern belt” is essential not only for the establishment of common energy and transport infrastructure, thus increasing competitiveness, but also for the reinforcement of European security.

The new format of collaboration between V-4 and Kyiv, declared in autumn 2014, would also turn perspective and not only PR-based, if filled with tangible and useful for both parties initiatives: for instance, as the Lithuanian – Polish – Ukrainian team, greater involvement of “ex-leaders” of Central European in the implementation of Ukrainian reforms, crediting infrastructure development, joint educational and scientific projects, which are absolutely feasible, considering the potential of Ukrainian educational – scientific sphere.

Implementation of these plans depends on numerous factors, however, it is essential that Ukrainian crisis has forced Visegrad capitals to clearly understand their dependence on the events in the East. The determination and protection of joint regional interests, in particular, national security ones, is the issue of preserving Central European small countries. Furthermore, it is quite possible to pursue personal interests in the EU, taking into consideration that 14, 1% of European parliament deputies (106 out of 751) represent the Visegrad group – the reason to establish “Central European caucus” (Dostal V., Mocek O., 2015).

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**Abstract**

The factor of integral Central European space determines the formation of common challenges to the region's security. One part of them is not visualized or not perceived in the capital cities. These threats may be most vividly traced in the Transcarpathian region of Ukraine, taking into consideration the fact that it borders with the abovementioned countries. These are ethnopolitical threats, caused by the multiethnic population of the region, energy dependence, threats of social economic peripherization of Central European bordering territories, informational influence on the population, different attitudes to Ukraine – Russia conflict.

**Keywords:** *Central Europe, Ukraine, security, stability*

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