

CENTRAL EUROPE AND EUROPEAN DEFENCE INTEGRATION

GLOBSEC European Security Initiative

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GLOBSEC EUROPEAN SECURITY INITIATIVE



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Since the end of the Cold War, eleven Central European countries have joined the EU. These include the four Visegrad nations (Czechia, Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland), the three Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), the two East Balkan states (Bulgaria and Romania), and finally the two former Yugoslav republics (Croatia and Slovenia). Given that only 28 countries make up the entire EU, the eleven member size of the Central European group may seem like a large club. The population of the entire region, nevertheless, is less than 100 million compared to a population of 513 million for the entire EU in 2018.¹ The economies of Central Europe are among the fastest growing in the EU – 9 of 12 of the EU economies experiencing the most robust growth come from the region. But they still have much catching up to do. It is suffice to say that the largest economy in the region – Poland – accounted for just 2.9% of the entire EU economy in 2018.²

Now 15 years following the completion of the first wave of EU enlargement to former communist countries, it is clear that Central Europeans members have impacted the dynamics of European integration and have in effect changed the EU, not least by shifting EU geopolitics eastwards. Central European countries are often divided amongst themselves and it is rather the exception for the 11 to take a coordinated position on an issue of importance for the EU. However, on such occasions that they do act together - as on migration policy, climate change, and cohesion funds - they are usually effective.

Given their ex-communist legacy and the history of Soviet domination (with the exceptions of Slovenia and Croatia), it would seem reasonable to assume that the Central European countries would pursue a similar policy stance on issues of security and defence. To some extent this is expectation is matched by reality. All EU Member States from Central Europe are also members of NATO, all joining the Alliance ahead of their accessions to the EU. Most of these countries (with the exception of Slovenia) tend to be Atlanticist in their outlook although to a varying degree. However, as of today, Central European countries have not established a coordinated or consistent line on the issue of European Defence Integration. It is argued here that this is mostly on account two major factors. Firstly, despite their common ex-communist heritage, geography and geopolitics play a role in differentiating Central European states. Countries in the region, for example, express varying degrees of apprehension with regard to their perceived threat exposure to Russia. Secondly and relatedly, some Central European states have not treated issues of security and defence with a sense of urgency and priority (although this is changing).

This underlying context has instrumentally shaped the policies of Central European states towards the idea of European Defence Integration. However, the most important factor influencing the positions of Central Europeans is the current, still very loose, state of EU defence policy. As long as the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) remains aspirational, it is unlikely that a group of states that is still predominantly interested in catching up economically with Western Europe will focus their attention on EU defence ambitions. This is particularly the case in a context in which these countries link their security first and foremost to NATO.

1 FactsMaps. (n.d.). Projected Population Change in European Countries, 2017 to 2050. Retrieved from <http://factsmaps.com/projected-population-change-european-countries-2017-2050/>.

2 Bayer, L. (2018, April 20). Europe's eastern tigers roar ahead. Retrieved from <https://www.politico.eu/article/central-and-eastern-eu-gdp-growth-economies/>.

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The purpose of this paper is to assess the positions of Central European nations towards the idea of European Defence Integration (EDI) and to recommend some ways forward to advance both the pursuit of defence integration in the EU and the interests of Central Europeans as part of this initiative. It is assumed here that EDI is not in competition and is in fact complementary to NATO. The future development of the EDI, while deemed necessary here, should avoid grant schemes – such as EU defence autonomy or the European army – which are unrealistic and may potentially undermine NATO. This is important in light of the fact that NATO remains the cornerstone of Central Europe's security.



SECURITY AND DEFENCE POLICIES IN CENTRAL EUROPE

Central Europe consists predominantly of small and very small states. Only two nations in the region, Poland and Romania, can be categorized as middle size states in the EU context. Poland, with a population of over 38 million, is by far the largest state in the region. In the context of the entire EU though, Poland only has the 6th largest population. Romania, with a population of around 20 million, comes 7th in the EU. Czechia, the third most populous country in the region, is home to around 10 million people, making it the 11th largest country by population in the EU. Of the 11 countries in the region, only the militaries of three states – Poland, Romania and Czechia - have been classified among the top 40 most capable militaries of the world in 2019 according to the index of global firepower. The highest in the region, Poland, has been classified 24th (a fall from 17th in 2017). Czechia, meanwhile, came 30th and Romania 40th (a promotion from 50th in 2017).³ Other countries in the region have been classified much farther down the index.

Poland and Estonia are the most consistent defence spenders in the region. Since the late 1990s, Poland has abided by a law that mandates defence spending at a budgetary level of not less than 1.8% of GDP. Given that Poland's GDP has consistently grown since the early 1990s, its defence spending has also continuously expanded in real terms. In 2018, Poland's defence expenditures were increased to 2% of GDP, reaching nearly \$12 billion and making the country the 19th biggest defence spender in the world.⁴ Estonia has been the most consistent defence spender in the region, for years meeting the NATO-recommended threshold of 2% and spending 2.19% in 2019.⁵ However, since Estonia is the smallest country in the region – with a population of 1.3 million – its defence budget of \$669 million in 2019 is also relatively small.

Responding to Russian aggression in Ukraine and pressure from the Trump administration to increase military expenditures, all Central European countries have raised their defence spending in 2019.⁶ Apart from Poland and Estonia, three other Central European states - Lithuania, Latvia, and Romania - now meet the 2% threshold as recommended by NATO. According to NATO's official figures, all other states in the region were substantially below 2%, with Slovenia, Czechia, and Hungary barely scraping above a figure of 1% of GDP allocated to defence.⁷ Nevertheless, between 2018 and 2019, there has been a substantial rise in defence spending across the region, with Slovakia boosting its spending by 48.11% and in the process experiencing an increase from 1.22% of GDP spent on defence in 2018 to 1.74% in 2019. Slovakia intends to achieve the recommended 2% threshold in 2022.⁸ Bulgaria and Romania, moreover, have substantially increased their investment in defence between 2018 and 2019 - Bulgaria by 12.48% and Romania by over 15%.

3 Global Firepower. (n.d.). 2019 Military Strength Ranking. Retrieved from <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.asp>.

4 Lesiecki, R. (2019, March 15). Polski budżet obronny według NATO – 2,05 proc. PKB w 2018 r. i 1,89 proc. PKB w 2017 r. [ANALIZA]. Retrieved from <https://www.defence24.pl/polski-budzet-obronny-wedlug-nato205-proc-pkb-w-2018-r-i-189-proc-pkb-w-2017-r-analiza>.

5 Republic of Estonia, Ministry of Defence. (2019, September 15). Estonian defence budget 2019. Retrieved from <http://www.kaitseministeerium.ee/en/objectives-activities/defence-budget>.

6 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. (2019, April 29). World military expenditure grows to \$1.8 trillion in 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2019/world-military-expenditure-grows-18-trillion-2018>.

7 NATO, Press release. (2019, June 25). Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2012-2019). Retrieved from https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2019_06/20190625_PR2019-069-EN.pdf

8 Jancarikova, T. (2019, April 15). Slovakia to boost defense spending faster than planned: PM. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-slovakia-defence/slovakia-to-boost-defense-spending-faster-than-planned-pm-idUSKCN1RR1G7>.

East Flank Nations

The five states that are the most diligent defence spenders include the three Baltic States, Poland, and Romania. These countries stand out in the region as the Alliance's East flank nations and, with the exception of Romania, they directly border Russia and consider themselves to be most exposed to the Russian threat. Although not bordering directly with Russia, Romania also shares this sense of vulnerability. This is owing to Romania's proximity to Ukraine and most of all because of its connection to Romanian speaking Moldova, which includes the Russian-sponsored separatist region of Transdnistria and which was annexed by Soviet Russia. All these five nations (plus Bulgaria) currently host either an Alliance and/or bilateral American presence. The three Baltic States and Poland host multinational NATO battlegroups within the framework of Enhanced Forward Presence, as agreed at the NATO summit in Warsaw in 2016. The US in Poland, Canada in Latvia, the UK in Estonia, and Germany in Lithuania lead the groups, which altogether account for 4500-5000 troops. The groups also include contributions from other Central European countries, including Czech, Polish, Slovak, and Slovene units in Adazi in Latvia, Czech units in Rukla in Lithuania, and Romanians and Croats in Orzysz in Poland.⁹

Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria are hosting a bilaterally agreed American military presence following the completion of Status of Forces Agreements (SOFA), which the US signed with Romania and Bulgaria in 2005 and 2006 and with Poland in 2009.¹⁰ The initial agreements with Bulgaria and Romania were signed in the context of President George W. Bush's 'war on terror'. The Southeast European nations host training facilities, called Joint Task Force-East (and subsequently renamed the Black Sea Area Support Team), because of their relative proximity to the Middle East. The facilities incorporated within this framework include an airforce base near the city of Mihail Kogalniceanu and a land force training area in Babadag in Romania. These facilities are designated to host around 2600 US troops at any given time. In Bulgaria, the main facility is the Novo Selo Training Area, which is meant to host up to 2500 US troops.¹¹ These bases in both countries are modernised and sustained by significant contributions from the Pentagon budget.¹²

In addition, Romania is hosting certain components of the NATO-branded, but in effect American, missile defence system at a site in Deveselu, construction of which was completed in 2015. Work on another missile defence site in Poland in Redzikowo, meanwhile, is set to be completed by the end of 2020.¹³ Missile defence concepts were initially designed by the Bush administration to protect the American homeland against long-range missiles originating from the Middle East and North Korea. As such, the intention was to incorporate major facilities in Poland and Czechia. However, following Russian protests and President Obama's desire to 'reset' relations with Moscow, the plan was changed and replaced by the so-called Active Layered Theatre Ballistic Missile Defence. This new project became a central part of NATO's defence system, representing a significant departure from the initial concept of the Bush administration. Most importantly, the missile defence system is no longer designed to protect the American homeland, instead focusing only on conferring protection to Europe. It will, furthermore, only be capable of defending against short and middle range missiles. The facility in Czechia was scrapped altogether. However, despite the scaling down of the initial plan, both Romania and Poland received a substantial amount of American defence investment in the form of these missile defence installations.

9 NATO. (2018, December). NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence. Retrieved from https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2018_12/20181205_1812-factsheet_efp_en.pdf

10 US Department of State, Press statement. (2009, December 11). U.S. – Poland Supplemental Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). Retrieved from <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2009/dec/133470.htm>

11 Moldovan, D., Pantev, P., & Rhodes, M. (2019, August). Joint Task Force East and Shared Military Basing in Romania and Bulgaria. Georgie C. Marshall European Centre for Security Studies. Retrieved from http://www.marshallcenter.org/mcpublicweb/MCDocs/files/College/F_Publications/occPapers/occ-paper_21-en.pdf.

12 Luca, A. M. (2018, October 12). US Plans to Upgrade Military Bases in Romania, Bulgaria. Retrieved from <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/08/15/us-plans-to-boost-military-bases-in-romania-bulgaria-08-15-2018/>.

13 Domurat, I., & Borowski, J. (2018, August 31). Antyrakietowa baza USA w Redzikowie na ukończeniu. Retrieved from <http://wgospodarce.pl/informacje/53402-antyrakietowa-baza-usa-w-redzikowie-na-ukonczeniu>.

Finally, within the framework of the European Deterrence Initiative, initiated by President Obama and boosted by President Trump, Poland is hosting the US Armoured Brigade in Żagań. The brigade increases the total US presence in Poland to 4,500 troops, all of them based, however, on a rotational basis.¹⁴ Poland is seeking to change this arrangement and ensure the permanency of the American presence by offering to cover all costs of the initiative. In June 2019, during President Duda's White House visit, President Trump announced that the presence of US troops in Poland will be boosted by an additional 1000 soldiers (he, in fact, mentioned the figure of 2000 but official communication, nevertheless, states 1000) and that Poland will cover the entire cost. The US Ambassador to Warsaw, Georgette Mosbacher, have suggested that some troops could be relocated from Germany to Poland.¹⁵

Poland and Romania's strong Atlanticist leanings is also demonstrated in their procurement policies. Poland was the first former communist nation to purchase a large number (48) of F-16 fighter-jets - already in the first decade of the 2000s. Romania followed suit in 2013 and 2019 and bought several second-hand F-16s from Portugal.¹⁶ Interestingly, Slovakia has also recently signed a deal with Lockheed-Martin for the delivery of 14 F-16s, which will replace Soviet-era jets, by 2022.¹⁷

Both Poland and Romania have also signed a deal for the construction of domestic missile and air defence systems with the maker of Patriot missiles - Raytheon. The value of the Polish contract is \$4.75 billion and delivery is foreseen for 2022.¹⁸ In the meantime, Romania signed a similar contract with Raytheon although its specific value was not made public, probably because of the sensitivity involved in negotiating a similar contract to that of Poland.¹⁹

Mittleuropa (+Bulgaria) Nations

Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Hungary, Slovakia, and Slovenia do not share the former group's self-image as Eastern flank countries vulnerable to a Russian threat. Other than Bulgaria, all other states in this group were formerly part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Their experience with Russia as a threat is either practically non-existent - the case with Croatia and Slovenia as two countries that were never invaded by Russia - or limited to the communist period as was the case with Czechoslovakia (1968) and Hungary (1956). Bulgaria stands out as a unique case as a country that was liberated from centuries of Ottoman rule with significant aid coming from Tsarist Russia. As a whole, the typical East flank emphasis on the use of deterrence against Russia is, consequently, considerably weaker in this group.

This combined historical legacy and geographical remoteness from Russia has engendered consequences on the security and defence policies of these countries. Their weaker sense of an imminent threat from Russia has had an impact on the level of their overall investment in defence and their aspirations for hosting a foreign – specifically American – presence on their soil. All these countries spend considerably below 2% of GDP on defence. A partial exception to this rule is Slovakia, which, as noted above, has recently registered a major hike in defence spending. Hungary, Slovenia, and Czechia, meanwhile, are spending a little above 1% of GDP and are nowhere near on track to reach the 2% threshold.

While, as pointed out above, Bulgaria, in fact, hosts a considerable American military presence, this did not materialise in response to Sofia's sense of insecurity but rather as an opportunity that was

¹⁴ U.S. Mission Poland (2017, August 31). American Armored Brigade Combat Team in Poland. Retrieved from <https://pl.usembassy.gov/abct/>

¹⁵ Gmosbacher. (2019, August 8). Poland meets its 2% of GDP spending obligation towards NATO. Germany does not. We would welcome American troops in Germany to come to Poland. [twitter]. <https://twitter.com/USAmbPoland/status/1159489744683896832?s=20>

¹⁶ Romania Insider. (2019, July 4). Romania to buy five more F-16 jet fighters. Retrieved from <https://www.romania-insider.com/romania-buys-more-f-16-jets>.

¹⁷ U.S. News. (2018, December 12). Slovakia Inks Deal to Buy 14 F-16s From US Lockheed Martin. Retrieved from <https://www.usnews.com/news/business/articles/2018-12-12/slovakia-inks-deal-to-buy-14-f-16s-from-us-lockheed-martin>.

¹⁸ Kelly, L. (2018, March 28). Poland signs \$4.75 billion deal for U.S. Patriot missile system facing Russia. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-raytheon-poland-patriot/poland-signs-4-75-billion-deal-for-u-s-patriot-missile-system-facing-russia-idUSKBN1H417S>.

¹⁹ AP News. (2018, November 2). Romania buys 3 extra Patriot missiles for long-term defense. Retrieved from <https://apnews.com/12014643569843d980c6385784a6fecb>.

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initiated and financed by the US. American investment in Czechia was planned in the context of Bush's missile defence ambitions but the hosting of the shield, which was eventually cancelled by the Obama administration, was very unpopular in Czechia and was opposed by two thirds of the population.²⁰ None of the nations in this group, furthermore, sought to host NATO's units in the context of Enhanced Forward Presence. In response to the Ukrainian crisis, Czechia and Slovakia explicitly ruled out hosting an American military presence, which was even likened by the then Slovak Prime Minister to the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.²¹ Hungary under the leadership of Viktor Orbán has become the most pro-Russian state in the EU. Like Hungary, Slovenia wants to deepen its energy ties with Russia and supports the lifting of sanctions imposed by the EU on Moscow in response to the annexation of Crimea.²² It is, therefore, unsurprising that Budapest or Ljubljana would not risk severing their close ties with Moscow by seeking to initiate a NATO presence on their territories.

Bulgaria, however, presents a separate case altogether. Its population and some of its political parties harbour historically motivated pro-Russian sentiment. Yet, since Bulgaria made a strategic decision to join NATO and the EU, it has shown a proneness to bend under Western pressure. Bulgaria has agreed to host a US military presence, as discussed above, and pulled out of the South Stream gas pipeline, Russia's signature energy project, and the Belene Nuclear plant project. However, these pro-Western strategic choices have been the subject of intense domestic controversy in Bulgaria, contributing also to endeavours to develop a more balanced position to Sofia's foreign policy. This is exemplified by the fact that Bulgaria did not agree to a permanent NATO presence in the Black Sea area, as proposed by Romania, and did not participate in the Western show of solidarity in expelling Russian diplomats as a response to the attempted poisoning of London-based former Russian spy Skripal.²³ While Bulgaria remains a member of the Western camp, some within the ranks of its political class are quite openly representing Russian interests.

The geopolitical preferences in this group of Central European countries are to some extent also reflected in their acquisition policies. At the moment, none of the countries in this group are using US-made F16 fighter jets and quite a few are still servicing the Russian-made MIG 21. Two nations in this group, Czechia and Hungary, have opted against purchasing F-16s and have instead decided to lease Swedish Gripen JAS 39 fighter jets.²⁴ Croatia, after having failed to buy the Israeli-made F16, is also considering buying or leasing Gripens.²⁵ However, Slovakia and Bulgaria have announced their intention to buy a number of F16s in the future although in both cases the issue is the subject of domestic controversy.²⁶

Regional Cooperation

A combination of modest resources devoted to defence and continued vulnerabilities provides the impetus for Central Europeans to combine their forces and address their security challenges in collaboration with one another. At the same time, divisions in geopolitical perspectives, as laid out above, and political resistance within different countries both act as brakes on this process. Overall progress on this matter has, consequently, been slow but there are, nonetheless, several NATO, EU, and regional initiatives in which Central Europeans, in fact, join their forces.

20 Richter, J. (2008, January 23). Agreement on Missile Defence Between the Czech Republic and the United States on Verge of Being Reached. Retrieved from <https://www.radio.cz/en/section/curraffrs/agreement-on-missile-defence-between-the-czech-republic-and-the-united-states-on-verge-of-being-reached>.

21 Lopatka, J. (2014, June 4). Slovak PM follows Czechs in ruling out foreign NATO troops. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-slovakia-nato/slovak-pm-follows-czechs-in-ruling-out-foreign-nato-troops-idUSKBN0EF18F20140604>.

22 Association of Accredited Public Policy Advocates to the European Union. (2017, September 11). Russian Influence in Slovenia. Retrieved from <http://www.aalep.eu/russian-influence-slovenia>.

23 Samorukov, M. (2018, May 25). The Balkan Cycle: Why Russo-Bulgarian Relations Are Growing Again. Retrieved from <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/76440>.

24 Adamowski, J. (2016, March 25). Czech Republic, Hungary Mull Joint Gripen Squadron. Retrieved from <https://www.defensenews.com/air/2016/03/25/czech-republic-hungary-mull-joint-gripen-squadron/>.

25 Dunai, P. (2019, July 3). Croatia Kicks Off a New Round of Fighter Procurement. Retrieved from <https://www.ainonline.com/aviation-news/defense/2019-07-03/croatia-kicks-new-round-fighter-procurement>.

26 RadioFreeEurope, RadioLiberty. (2019, July 31). Bulgaria Gives Final Green Light To Biggest Military Acquisition Since Fall Of Communism. Retrieved from <https://www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-buys-8-f-16-jets-from-u-s/30084680.html>.

As far as the EU is concerned, the most tangible manifestation of defence cooperation in the region are regular rotations of the V4 (Visegrad4) EU Battlegroup led by Poland. The first rotation of the battlegroup took place in the first half of 2016. In addition to the V4 units, this rotation included a small number of Ukrainian troops.²⁷ The 2019 rotation of the group, which concludes in December 2019, includes a number of Croatian troops, in addition to the core V4 units. The next rotation of the V4 battlegroup is scheduled for 2023 and its exact composition remains uncertain at this point but its core will once again be comprised of V4 countries. The V4 battlegroup, therefore, has become a stable institution, both in terms of the timing and composition of these rotations. This consistency is rather exceptional in the EU context.

There is some scepticism as to the actual usefulness of the EU battlegroup concept, prompted by the fact that while the EU has had a battlegroup on standby since 2005, they have never been employed in actual combat.²⁸ However, when the groups are on rotation, they regularly perform exercises and enhance interoperability, thereby constructively supporting the process of defence integration, for example, in Central Europe.

Almost all Central European countries, with the exception of Croatia, Czechia, and Slovenia, agreed to host NATO's Force Integration Units (NFITU). The purpose of these small units – numbering approximately 40 personnel – is to facilitate the rapid deployment of NATO forces to the Alliance's Eastern flank. The NFITU have already supported NATO deployments to Poland and the Baltic States in the context of the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP). The units in Bulgaria and Romania, meanwhile, have supported the Alliance's large scale exercise NOBLE JUMP 2017, which was conducted by Joint Force Command Naples in Italy.²⁹

Separate from this, a host of Central European countries also dispatched troops to serve in NATO battlegroups in the context of the Enhanced Forward Presence. In this vein, Czechia, Slovenia, Slovakia, and Poland provided troops to the Canada-led battlegroup in Adazi, Latvia. And Romania and Croatia provided contributions to the US-led battlegroup in Orzysz in Poland, near the Suwałki-gap.³⁰ The airforces of Central European countries have, furthermore, contributed to enhancing the security of the skies in the Baltic States, in the context of air-policing. Poland has been by far the most frequent contributor to these missions, serving eight rotations in Lithuania since 2006. Czechia, Hungary, and Romania too though have contributed to rotations in the Baltic States.³¹

While the V4 is the best known institution supporting integration in the region, defence matters are also a subject of concern for another exclusive body called Central European Defence Co-operation (CEDC). The organization's membership is restricted to states that were part of the former Habsburg Empire: Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia, and Austria. Poland, meanwhile, holds observer status in the organization. The group represents a distinct geopolitical perspective – referred to as *Mittleuropa* above – that is less concerned about Russia and instead focused largely on the topic of migration.³²

27 Defence24. (2016, February 16). V4 Battle Group - Exercise. Retrieved from <https://www.defence24.com/v4-battle-group-exercise-photos>.

28 For an overview of the concept, see: Gustav Lindstrom, Enter the EU Battlegroups, Chaillot Paper No. 97, Paris February 2007

29 NATO. (n.d.). NATO Force Integration Units (NFITU). Retrieved from <https://shape.nato.int/operations/nato-force-integration-units>.

30 NATO. (2017, May). NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence . Retrieved from https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2017_05/1705-factsheet-efp.pdf.

31 TVN24. (2019, May 2). Polscy piloci przekazali misję Baltic Air Policing . Retrieved from <https://www.tvn24.pl/wiadomosci-ze-swiatea,2/baltic-air-policing-polscy-piloci-przekazali-misje-wegrom,932325.html>.

32 Joint Declaration of the Ministers of Defence of the Central European Defence Cooperation. (2017, June 17). Retrieved from <http://www.army.cz/assets/en/ministry-of-defence/newsroom/news/cedc-declaration-june-2017.pdf>.



CENTRAL EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVES ON EU DEFENCE INTEGRATION

Upon joining the EU, most Central European states paid little heed to the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), which following the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty (2009) was renamed as the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Central Europeans tended to see their NATO and EU membership as a part of the same process – often referred to as Euroatlantic integration. In this context, NATO was perceived as providing for the security of new members while the EU was seen as conferring modernization and economic opportunities for ex-communist states.

The first wave of EU enlargement to Central European states (2004) coincided with a major crisis in transatlantic relations over the war in Iraq. Practically all states that were included in this wave of enlargement (with the exception of Slovenia) supported the United States and were genuinely surprised that they were criticised for it by the majority of the EU.³³ Consequently, Central Europeans learned the hard way that Western allies can be divided and that there was a drive for strategic autonomy within the EU as a response to the transatlantic crisis.

However, in subsequent years, the idea of EU strategic autonomy did not really take off. The EU instead became embroiled in its own internal crisis over the failed Constitutional Treaty (2005), the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty (2009), and finally the economic and single currency crisis (2009-2013). During this period, defence integration in the EU was scarcely on the radar in most Central European countries. Like other EU member states, Central European countries, in fact, drastically cut their defence budgets in response to the economic crisis and the Euro crisis. This meant that while Central Europeans were struggling – mostly failing - to meet their obligations towards NATO, they especially paid scant attention to the issue of EU defence integration, seen as of secondary importance. A notable exception to this pattern was Poland, which under the former pro-European administration (2007-2015), teamed up with France and Germany and jointly proposed measures to boost CSDP, including the setting up of an independent headquarters for planning EU operations. At the time, Warsaw emerged as the keenest supporter of EU defence integration, being, in fact, more ambitious on this matter than Berlin and Paris.³⁴

The EU interest in defence integration started to re-emerge following Donald Trump's election in 2016. President Trump has openly questioned the usefulness of NATO, previously calling it an 'obsolete alliance', and has on several occasions put into doubt the application of the Alliance's Article 5, which stipulates the obligation of collective defence.³⁵ The loss of certainty regarding the US security guarantee has prompted a shift in favor of European defence integration and a renewed call for the development of the EU's strategic autonomy.³⁶

As opposed to the former mostly declaratory moves on the matter, this time around the EU has set up concrete initiatives that are indeed aimed at promoting defence integration between member states. Most importantly, in 2018, the EU launched the mechanism of Permanent Structured Co-operation, abbreviated PESCO, which allows select groups of states to participate in specialised defence projects. All Central European states were among the 25 member states that opted to join PESCO. However, the initial round of 10 PESCO projects attracted rather minimal interest from Central Europe. Exceptions to

33 See: Sedivy, J. & Zaborowski, M. (2005). Old Europe, New Europe and Transatlantic Relations In K. Longhurst & M. Zaborowski (ed.), Old Europe, New Europe and the Transatlantic Security Agenda (pp. 1-27). Oxon: Routledge.

34 Zaborowski, M. (2018, January 25). Poland and European Defence Integration. Retrieved from https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/poland_and_european_defence_integration.

35 Baker, P. (2017, April 13). Trump's Previous View of NATO Is Now Obsolete. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/13/world/europe/nato-trump.html>.

36 See: Ronja Kempin and Barbara Kunz, "France, Germany, and the Quest for European Strategic Autonomy: Franco-German Defence Cooperation in A New Era", Notes du Cerfa, No.141, Ifri, December 2017

this rule were Romania, which joined five projects, and Slovakia, which became a Lead Participant on the Indirect Fire Support/EuroArtillery project. The other two most military capable Central European states, Poland (already under a Eurosceptic administration) and Czechia, chose to take part only in two and three projects, respectively. Both Poland and Czechia, moreover, opted to join PESCO at the last moment and with reservations that were underlined in their letter of accession.

Following the announcement of the decision to join the mechanism of enhanced co-operation, Poland's foreign minister, Witold Waszczykowski, openly declared that Warsaw did so unwillingly and that it is opposed to the evolution of defence integration in a manner that could rival NATO and endanger relations with the U.S.. Waszczykowski also expressed concerns about privileging large European (meaning Franco-German) defence industries, which, in his view, could lead to the exclusion of the smaller scale Central European industry and discrimination against the American armament industry.³⁷ The Czechs expressed similar apprehensions, albeit with a greater emphasis on concerns regarding the status of their own domestic arms industry. As opposed to the Poles, the Czechs refrained from advocating for the interests of the US industry. Like the Poles, however, the Czechs expressed scepticism regarding the idea that EU defence initiatives should evolve in the direction of a European Defence Union.³⁸

However, despite this early scepticism, all Central European nations, including Poland and Czechia, opted to boost their participation in the second round of PESCO projects, which were announced in November 2018. Poland, for example, is now a member or an observer in 10 of 17 projects.³⁹ Czechia and most other Central European countries also now participate in a greater number of PESCO projects than before.

In the meantime, it has become apparent that PESCO has not developed into a mechanism of sanctioned exclusion. The institution, which was envisioned as a forum for promoting deeper integration among select member states, has come to encompass almost all EU member states. Only the UK, Denmark, and Malta have opted to stay out. That has prompted France to set up a more exclusive forum – the European Intervention Initiative (E2I) – outside the institutional framework of both NATO and the EU.⁴⁰ The E2I is intended to focus on enhancing capabilities and promoting a shared strategic culture - meaning the ability and willingness to cooperate on operations. With membership restricted to just 10 states, the E2I has the benefit of including the UK and Denmark – both of which opted out of PESCO – in a context in which the UK is expected to leave the EU entirely. However, at the same time, the initiative is exclusionary towards Central European states, with Estonia being the only representative of the region invited to join.

37 Ministry of Foreign Affairs Poland. (2017, November 13). Minister Witold Waszczykowski: We joined PESCO but with doubts, PAP dispatch from 13 November 2017. Retrieved from https://msz.gov.pl/en/news/they_wrote_about_us/minister_witold_waszczykowski__we_joined_pesco_but_with_doubts__pap_dispatch_from_13_november_2017_

38 Errera, P. (n.d.). PESCO Drivers: The Floor is yours . Retrieved from <https://www.eda.europa.eu/webzine/issue15/cover-story/pesco-drivers-the-floor-is-yours>.

39 Lesiecki, R. (2018, November 20). 17 nowych projektów PESCO, Polska zaangażowana w lądowe bezzałogowce. Retrieved from <https://www.defence24.pl/17-nowych-projektow-pesco-polska-zaangazowana-w-ladowe-bezalogowce>.

40 Witney, N. (2018, May 22). Macron and the European Intervention Initiative: Erasmus for soldiers? Retrieved from https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_macron_and_the_european_intervention_initiative_erasmus_for_sold.



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Now 15 years into their first wave of EU enlargement, Central European countries do not hold clear positions on the topic of European Defence Integration. But neither is the notion of EU defence itself clear. There have been three stages in the evolution of positions on European security in the region.

- ▶ First (1992-2004): Central Europeans perceived security issues to be exclusively in the NATO basket and paid scant attention to EU defence ambitions. That perception led to clarity in objectives and relative unity in Central European security policies, guided first and foremost by the desire to join NATO and become a close ally of the United States. Consequently, there was near complete unity in support for the US's controversial war in Iraq.
- ▶ Second (2005-2015): Central Europeans became painfully aware of the transatlantic divide. In some states of the region (Mitteleuropa), the propensity to side with the US began to weaken, mostly in reaction to a fading of anxiety with respect to Russia. While the eruption of the Ukrainian crisis (2013-2014) injected a renewed sense of vulnerability in the region, it was met with different reactions among the East Flank nations than in the more centrally located Mitteleuropa states. The EU defence ambition was scaled down during this period as attention shifted to the EU constitutional crisis and then to managing the economic crisis. During this period, Poland emerged as the only state in the region that provided strong support to European defence integration. However, following autumn 2015 national elections, Poland's position reversed course.
- ▶ Third (2016-2019): Following the election of Donald Trump, European governments have been forced to re-evaluate their reliance on the U.S. for security guarantees. At the same time, these countries have come under increasing pressure to raise their budgetary allocations on defence. The EU has reacted by launching initiatives strengthening defence integration, including PESCO and the European Defence Fund. Outside the EU and NATO frameworks, France has successfully launched the European Intervention Initiative (E2I). All Central Europeans are increasing their defence spending with East Flank nations meeting the NATO goal of 2%. Despite initial reluctance, Poland (under a Eurosceptic administration since autumn 2015) and Czechia joined PESCO and quickly become major contributors to this mechanism of enhanced integration. And Slovakia became a lead participant on one of the projects. While some Central European countries (East Flank but not only) are strengthening their ties with the US, they are also clearly interested in developing European defence integration.

This evolution of attitudes in Central Europe towards the notion of European Defence Integration is not markedly different from the rest of the EU. Like other EU nations, Central Europeans have not treated the idea of European defence as a priority topic. Until recently, the countries of the region presumed that their security needs were essentially guaranteed by the US and NATO. An element of uncertainty introduced following the election of Donald Trump has clearly had a mobilising effect on the level of defence investment in the region. Central European countries are also now more open to investing in European Defence Integration but on the clear condition that the new mechanisms will not undermine their relations with the US and will not duplicate NATO. The following measures could further boost the interest of Central Europeans in European defence initiatives:

- 1) The complementarity of EU defence initiatives with NATO needs to be repeatedly stressed and proven on the ground. The framing of EU defence integration in strategic autonomy terms is counter-productive and contributes to unnecessary reticence in Central Europe.

- 2) Central Europeans need to be assured that the integration of the European defence industry will not favour large West European companies to the detriment of small and middle sized Central European companies that are unable to compete with their well-established corporate rivals from France and Germany. There is especially much scepticism in the region with regard to the lobbying of French industrial interests, perceived as self-centred and largely uninterested in Central Europe.
- 3) The EU should consider developing adequate reassurance measures that recognize the vulnerability and threat perception of member states bordering Russia. This could be achieved in the form of a material presence, for example, by complementing NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence.
- 4) The European Intervention Initiative (E2I) may prove to be a useful instrument for binding the UK and Denmark to the notion of European defence. Limiting participation in this initiative may also prove reasonable given the desire to keep this structure light and task-oriented. However, by excluding almost all Central Europeans states (with the exception of Estonia) from this initiative, the message was sent that this instrument is political rather than pragmatic in nature. None of the most military capable states in the region was invited to join this framework. This should be re-evaluated in the future.
- 5) Central Europeans should enhance their regional defence integration. The V4 nations should take their cooperation beyond the EU battle group and consider, for example, joint acquisition of ammunition and other equipment. The nations of the former Yugoslavia: Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Slovenia should combine forces in training, acquisition, and maintenance. Similar practice is done by the Baltic states. In acting as a group or a collection of groups, Central European countries can save precious resources and further gain improved opportunities for amplifying their voices and influencing the future direction of EDI.

14) CENTRAL EUROPE AND EUROPEAN DEFENCE INTEGRATION





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