

Competing geopolitical approaches towards Eastern Europe

Regional specifications

Eastern Europe is one of the regions with a high number of conflicts, overlapping geopolitical interests and competing external strategies. Situated between the Balkans, Central Asia, and the Middle East, and reaching to the South Caucasus, the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, this region offers a great geopolitical potential due to its strategic positioning between Europe and Asia. Thus, the periphery of the Eastern European neighbourhood constitutes a geopolitical node as the region offers strategic corridors from Europe and Central Asia, on the one hand, to the Black, the Caspian, and the Aegean seas, on the other hand. Despite their transformational efforts, all six countries in Eastern Europe demonstrate poor governance structures and weak institutions. Moreover, they put the emphasis on the development of their relations with the main external actors involved in the region, rather than with each other. What follows are the most significant geopolitical approaches towards Eastern Europe.

The EU and its Eastern Neighbourhood

The EU policy approach is being shaped by the internal institutional dynamics regarding the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). It also results from the consolidation of the foreign and security policy agenda of both the EU and individual member states such as Germany, France, Italy, Poland et al. In fact, a bilateral approach is used, when specific geopolitical and security-related interests by the individual actors come to the fore. Contrary to this, new member states such as Poland, the Baltic countries, Bulgaria and Romania prefer the EU to the bilateral approach due to the lack of effective tools and sufficient financial means to interact with the region in a more comprehensive way. In this regard, there is an obvious difference between the old and more recent EU members regarding their threat perceptions, particularly the evaluation on Russia's ambiguous role in the shared

neighbourhood. While Germany, France or Italy have built up business and economic relations with Russia over the last decades prior to the military conflict in Ukraine, the new member states predominantly perceive Moscow as one of the main threats to their security if not the primary one.

The Eastern European countries' relations with the EU reflect various levels of engagement. Starting with political association and economic integration (Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia), energy relations (Azerbaijan), extending to an increased mobility through visa liberalisation (Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia), and deepening tailor-made relations with Armenia, Belarus and Azerbaijan, it also offers institutional and administrative capacity building in all six countries. The EU's approach is predominantly based on a soft power agenda, which stems from the normative power of the Copenhagen criteria, and the EU's security strategy documents, particularly regarding the use of non-military means due to their long-term political, economic and social effects.

Brussels sees the *Eastern Partnership* initiative as the most suitable initiative towards the shared neighbourhood as it is promoting the comprehensive socio-economic and political transformation of the region. A special focus is put on the fight against corruption, the introduction of the European *acquis communautaire* into the national law systems as well as the strengthening of the rule of law. Furthermore, the frontrunners of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) – Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova – will aim at a membership perspective in the long run as the implementation of the association agreements (AA) and deep and comprehensive free trade area (DCFTA) is expected to help these countries to accelerate the political association and the economic integration with the EU.

The foreign ministers of the EU member states identified four priorities for the *Eastern Partnership* summit in Brussels in November, encompassing the most rele-

vant spheres of engagement: 1) strengthening institutions and good governance; 2) economic development and market opportunities; 3) connectivity, energy efficiency, environment and climate change; and 4) mobility and people-to-people contacts.¹

At the EaP summit in November, the EU and the six Eastern European countries welcomed the full entry into force of the AA and the DCFTA with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova as a significant step towards the approximation with the EU. Furthermore, the EU signed a Partnership Agreement with Armenia and made an important progress regarding a new framework agreement. Finally, the relations with Belarus were further deepened within the framework of several working groups and dialogue formats. The EU reaffirmed the importance of the European Neighbourhood Instrument and other available financial tools to promote the transformational processes in Eastern Europe and the reforms in the six countries. This incentive-based approach known as "*more-for-more*" would be further used to benefit those that are most engaged in reforms. Moreover, the *20 Deliverables for 2020* were identified and listed as transparent targets for the next time frame between 2017 and 2020. They seek to "develop a more integrated, participatory, cross-sectoral, results-oriented approach" added to the EaP.²

Despite the progress towards deepening the relations between the EU and the six Eastern European countries, they are still caught in a geopolitical dilemma of '*either-or-decision*' in their foreign and security policy orientation towards Brussels and Moscow. Armenia and Belarus launched a policy of approximation with the EU while being in a very close partnership with Russia and a member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Georgia, on its part, sought to normalise relations with Moscow, even though it is on its path towards political association and economic integration with the EU. Ukraine has proclaimed its political will to seek

Euro-Atlantic integration and has been fundamentally at odds with Moscow since Russia's annexation of Crimea and the Russian involvement in the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine.

The USA and the NATO Eastern Flank

Eastern Europe is one of the regions, where the global leadership of the USA was weakly projected after the collapse of the Soviet Union. From a geopolitical point of view, Eastern Europe constitutes a strategic area bordering the NATO Eastern flank and a geopolitical node in the American pivot to Asia, particularly regarding threats scenarios from Russia and Iran. Moreover, the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea basins represent significant geopolitical focal points next to the Mediterranean Sea due to the intersection of various active involvements by Russia, Iran or Turkey. Thus, these basins remain highly contested not only for security but also for geopolitical reasons due to their resource-rich areas.

The USA applies a different approach to Eastern Europe compared to the EU or the European members of NATO. Contrary to the EU's strategic objective of *a secure Europe in a better world*, which rests on the principle of an *effective multilateralism*, the American approach aims at an *instrumental multilateralism* based on the American leadership worldwide.

The US stance in Eastern Europe is aimed at preventing a close approximation between the countries in the region and Russia that might harm the stability of the Eastern Flank or promote a strong Russian presence beyond the region. While the EU is predominantly applying a soft power approach in the region through the *Eastern Partnership* and the *ENP* programs, Washington is being perceived as the only actor capable of providing realistic security guarantees through troops deployment, military exercises or defence cooperation. One of the most significant steps has been the recent deployment of a \$800 million defence missile shield on the US bases in Romania and Poland.³ Not only new NATO members such as Romania, Poland and the Baltics but also countries from

Eastern Europe such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia are continuously pointing to the military build-up and nuclear sabre-rattling by Russia, which seeks to intimidate and prevent them from a closer defence and security cooperation with the USA. With Ukraine and Georgia clearly proclaiming their readiness to join the EU and NATO, whereas this foreign policy orientation also enjoys a great public support, the US could successfully expand its military footprint in the Black Sea and the Caucasian region through a defence cooperation. In what the US and the EU approaches coincide in Eastern Europe is the value-based component, aimed at the political, economic and social transformation of the countries in Eastern Europe as part of the stabilisation strategy in the region. Both actors promote democratic, pro-Western oriented political elites and governments that would seek a Euro-Atlantic integration. This has been the case with Georgia and Ukraine, following the dramatic events after 2008 respectively 2014.

NATO ceased the enlargement process after Albania and Croatia entered the Alliance in 2009 but expanded the defence cooperation with Eastern European countries such as Ukraine and Georgia. Following the Chicago summit in 2012, Montenegro became the next NATO member in 2017. Georgia also intensified its efforts towards the Atlantic integration and remains strongly interested in joining the Alliance. The events that evolved in Ukraine after 2014 led to the emergence of the problem of territorial integrity following Russia's annexation of Crimea. Territorial integrity issues such as Ukraine losing territories to Russia, or Georgia's moving borders with South Ossetia, eventually enhanced NATO's importance in the region. Even though the current security threats are of mixed nature and require a civil-military response, it is Eastern Europe, where the hard power issues are manifested to such an extent that conventional security issues still have priority due to their defence-related implications over climate change, scarce resources or energy security.

NATO offers a platform for discussing security-related issues, upon which the EU and the USA can build their relations with the countries in Eastern Europe. The alliance introduced a comprehensive approach by intensifying the institutional cooperation with the EU, resulting in a broader scope of activities on a variety of non-security issues.

Russia's shrinking near abroad and growing regional assertiveness

Eastern Europe plays a decisive role for Russia, which considers it to be its *near abroad* due to historic, cultural, political and economic ties with the former Soviet republics there. From a geostrategic point of view, Moscow seeks to ensure its presence and long-term links to the countries in the shared neighbourhood as its stability and security directly impacts the Russian interests.⁴ However, Russia has been dealing with gradually shrinking influence and power projection in this region due to the growing involvement of the EU and the USA over the last twenty-five years. Russia's claims to control the near abroad and consolidate the local support in favour of pro-Russian positions have been linked to economic and political pressure as well as to hard power tools.

In fact, Russia has become more assertive in the direct neighbourhood in the last few years, following a military engagement in the conflicts in Eastern Ukraine and Syria. Its geostrategic approach follows a vertical (North-South) expansion of its geopolitical interests encompassing the Arctic and the Baltics (Baltic Sea), through Eastern Europe and the Black Sea to the Mediterranean Sea, the Middle East and North Africa. The access to the Baltic, Mediterranean and the Black Seas must be always ensured from a Russian perspective, and the Western Flank (which is the Eastern Flank for the NATO members) remains one of the most significant geostrategic focal points due to the concentration of Russian population in this area. This area has witnessed the most intensive military build-up as well as various military exercises over the last few years (e.g. *Zapad* 2017). Russia also strengthened its Western Flank though

surprising military readiness checks or wide-range drills, which are aimed at having a deterrent effect on NATO.

Furthermore, Moscow seeks to remain involved through military presence or diplomatic negotiations in all frozen conflicts in Eastern Europe, which plays a double role for the Russian approach. It prevents the countries in the region from a possible membership in NATO due to the unresolved conflicts on their territory and it provides mechanisms for interference and channels of influence in favour of Russia.

Following the launch of China's *One Road One Belt* (now known as *Belt and Road Initiative*), it has been argued that a rivalry between Beijing and Moscow for the contested areas in Central Asia and Eastern Europe seems plausible, as the Chinese connectivity, infrastructure and energy projects are aimed at bridging Asia and Europe predominantly through the Eurasian landmass. However, the Chinese grand project constitutes a horizontal expansion from the Western parts in China to Europe, which does not necessarily collide with the vertical expansion of Russian geopolitical interests but rather could be complementary in pushing forward the common interest of consolidating the Eurasian landmass by reducing another external actors' involvement (e.g. USA, EU). The intersection of these projections provided areas for coordination and cooperation of strategic nature. From Russia's perspective, the Chinese participation in its near abroad could deliver the necessary liquidity through development and infrastructure investments, which could in turn help boost trade links and economy growth in Russia. At the same time, China accepted the vertical expansion of Russia's geopolitical interests as Beijing saw a benefit from the Russian control over future Arctic trade routes, the stabilisation of the Russian zones of influence in the Middle East and North Africa as well as further strategic complementarity of geopolitical interests towards the stabilisation of the Eurasian landmass (e.g. coordination of activities between the major regional organisations of CSTO and SCO). Meanwhile, the emerging *Dragonbear* includes a wide

range of areas of cooperation and coordinates the foreign policy positions of China and Russia on urgent global issues such as North Korea, Syria, Iran, Libya, Venezuela et al. Moreover, the *Dragonbear* has launched a coordination of positions at leading international organisations such as the UN and its specialized agencies, particularly in terms of voting behaviour during the sessions initiated by the West.

To conclude, the Russian policy towards Eastern Europe shall be seen as a systemic and a multifaceted approach towards the shared neighbourhood. It encompasses *grey zones* of what is allowed or not allowed such as e.g. the number of troops participating in Russian military drills; of what is *physic* or *cyber* as in the case with the various allegations on the use of Russian bots to push narratives on social media like *Twitter* and *Facebook*; of *information* and *disinformation* (e.g. Fake news), and, finally, of *war* and *peace* through the direct and indirect Russian military involvement in the shared neighbourhood and beyond.

China's West meets Europe's East

Certainly, one of the most significant geo-economic developments of the last years was the launch of the ambitious *One Road One Belt* initiative by China in 2013. In 2015, a list, published by the International Trade Institute in China, included all six Eastern European countries among overall 24 countries from the old continent, meaning that the *16+1* initiative was expanded into the broader context of OBOR by adding Russia, Turkey and the six EaP countries.

When dealing with the Chinese role in Eastern Europe, it is to be considered that China is more likely to choose a bilateral approach for several reasons. Primarily, one should look at the unprecedented rapprochement between China and Russia at a strategic level (the *Dragonbear*) – from high-ranking political links to institutional and diplomatic cooperation to comprehensive cooperation in various fields. The *Dragonbear* has managed to strengthen and deepen strategic links in various areas by purposely ignoring conflicting interests

in others. Russia's near abroad represents one of those areas, which has also become part of China's shift from the West to the East, and is playing a bridge role in connecting the *Belt and Road* initiative and the *16+1* program in Europe. In Central Asia, China has already shown its political readiness to combine the integrational efforts of both OBOR and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union, which reflects the Russian geo-economic interests as well. Thus, it can be assumed that China will promote connectivity, infrastructure and investment projects in the near abroad in coordination with Russia or if not, by complying with Russian geopolitical interests in the region. Both countries have already signed an agreement on integrating the EAEU and OBOR, indicating an interest in consolidating the Eurasian landmass in the long term.

The *Belt and Road* initiative, however, might cause more rigorous competition among the countries in the region for the Chinese liquidity and investments.⁵ For instance, Georgia is aimed at transforming itself "into a logistics and transportation hub to connect Asia and Europe."⁶ One of the key drivers for the Chinese interest is Georgia's, Ukraine's and Moldova's privileged access to the European Union through the DCFTA. The perspective of signing a free trade agreement with these countries, which are at the same time building a free trade area with the European Union, attracts mostly the Chinese attention. Furthermore, it is the proximity to the Black and Caspian Sea and the possibility for additional connectivity and infrastructure projects along the traditional *Silk Roads* that makes the countries from Eastern Europe attractive for Chinese OBOR.

The decisive driver for Chinese investments, however, is the relatively low financial burden compared to the expectations of high returns. In addition, the attractive investment policy in these countries coupled with the flexibility of the Chinese projects, led to the inclusion of the six countries into the *Belt and Road* initiative. Rail connectivity represents a significant part of China's new Geoeconomics linking Central Asia and China to Europe in order

to boost trade, investments and economic activities. In this regard, the Eastern European countries see in OBOR the potential to domestically generate more jobs, build more infrastructure as well as to boost the economy and the FDIs. Consequently, the *Silk Rail Roads* have expanded since 2015. Such is the case with the Kars-Tbilisi-Baku railway, which builds a transport corridor between Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey. In Georgia, a train cargo from China needs meanwhile 15 days to reach Tbilisi. The railroad connectivity includes Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Georgia, reaching Turkey much faster than through any sea routes.⁷

For Georgia and Ukraine, the OBOR offers also new perspective to expand trade and economic links with China, while at the same time bypassing Russia. The economic and trade links expanded in the last few years as Ukraine could replace some of the lost markets thanks to China. One of the significant developments for Kyiv was its inclusion in the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, connecting Ukraine with Azerbaijan, Georgia and Kazakhstan. Kyiv has also launched a new railroad connecting successfully China with Europe. As a result, China became the second biggest destination for Ukrainian export goods and the first destination for Ukrainian corn.⁸

Azerbaijan also gained an importance for Chinese trade projects, following various high-level meetings and visits between the two countries in more recent years. An agreement on cooperation in the field of energy was signed and a special focus was put on infrastructure and construction projects, among which were railroads projects between Europe and China. Moreover, Baku could receive one of the largest loans by China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) for the Trans-Anatolian gas pipeline (TANAP).⁹ Obviously, the EU might face a new competitor regarding future energy projects in Azerbaijan.

To sum it up, a new balance of power and influence is solidifying in Eastern Europe, reflecting the intersection of the Chinese geoeconomic interests between its ambitious *Belt and Road* initiative and

its regional comprehensive *16+1* approach in Europe. It is this part of Europe where China's offer can be interpreted as both an opportunity and a challenge. The Eastern European countries certainly perceive its ambitious policies as an opportunity to diversify the direct foreign investments portfolio at home and fill the regional infrastructure gap. At the same time, China might become a challenge towards other external actors such as the West and Russia, who have already been exerting an influence there for decades.

Turkey and its Ottoman legacy

Turkey has inherited its critical geostrategic position in the shared neighbourhood due to its bridge function between Europe and Asia during the rule of the Ottoman empire. For that matter, Ankara continues to play a significant role in the complex triangle between the Balkans, the Middle East and the South Caucasus through its access to resource-rich areas in the Black Sea and Mediterranean Sea. In this regard, its geostrategic position is in an area, which has been witnessing a projection of geopolitical interests by the EU, the USA, Russia, and now even China.

Currently, the role of Turkey has been growing in the region due to the military developments concerning the *Kurds'* question in Syria and Iraq as well as the rapprochement with Russia. In this regard, Turkey stepped out from the shadow of the American geopolitical interests in the region and developed a completely opposite foreign and security policy agenda from its previous *Zero problems with the neighbors'* approach. Consequently, the Turkish policy in the shared neighbourhood became more pro-active and engaging, including a broad range of political, economic and security-related issues. In this respect, Ankara started following in Russia's footsteps. On the one hand, Turkey's rapprochement with Russia led automatically to deteriorating bilateral relations with the USA, respectively with the NATO, reaching its low with Ankara's decision to buy the Russian anti-missile defense system S-400. On the other hand, Ankara's assertive actions towards the Kurds in Turkey and

Erdogan's positions towards tightening the autocratic rule after the failed military coup in 2016 led expectedly to a highly negative reaction by the EU. Both actors had previously agreed on re-opening the accession talks in return for closing the Balkan refugees route. As with all dynamic relationships in the region, the deterioration of the relations with the USA and the EU was directly linked to the revival of the bilateral relationship with Russia.

The shift from *Zero Problems Policy* towards a pro-active stance regarding the direct periphery took place in the last few years and caused major changes in Turkey's involvement in the region. The projection of geopolitical interests in Eastern Europe, Middle East and even Central Asia became part of the new Turkey's agenda, expanding the traditional space of influence in the Black Sea area as well as the Muslim communities in the direct periphery.

Turkey did not recognize the annexation of Crimea and openly condemned the Russian involvement in the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Furthermore, Ankara intensified the relations with Ukraine and the other Eastern European countries in order to counter growing Russian influence in the region. However, it managed to re-open the rapprochement with Moscow by overlooking conflictual issues and focusing on overlapping interests in the shared neighbourhood and beyond, among which energy, trade and security-related topics were on top of the agenda. Brussels, on the contrary, could not build a constructive relationship with Turkey, after the so called 're-energizing' phase in their relations had been launched in 2015, encompassing various fields of cooperation such as the refugees' crisis, security-related and border issues, as well as the war in Syria. On the opposite, the EU lost a momentum to deepen the bilateral relationship and is now even risking the complete freezing of the bilateral relations after several EU members have sent strong signals on their stance regarding the possible accession of Turkey in the EU. There is still a space for balancing the relations between the EU and Ankara, based for instance on the French position

by President Macron, who does not seek to antagonize Turkey's position towards Brussels as much as Germany and Austria would likely do under the newly elected Merkel and Kurz.¹⁰

Turkey continues to balance between Russia and Ukraine by rapidly developing the defense industry and military technology cooperation with Kyiv. Russia's actions against Georgia in 2008, respectively against Ukraine in 2014 alarmed Ankara about the changed constellations in the wider Black Sea area with a more resurgent Russia playing a key role again. Despite losing Crimea to Russia, Ukraine remains a Black Sea country due to its long sea coast, which is vital for the Turkish interests there. Furthermore, the country seeks a NATO membership, which additionally creates a counterweight to the military ambitions of Moscow in the region. From Turkey's perspective, strengthening Ukrainian security, particularly the naval and coast guard forces, will contribute to the Black Sea security balance in the long run.¹¹

Turkey will keep and most certainly expand its position towards the resource-rich Caucasus, Black and Caspian Sea area. Its control over the Turkish straits remains a geostrategic imperative for its foreign and security policy agenda. The growing interest in Central Asia is connected to Turkey's major objective of becoming an important energy hub for Europe, given that foreign gas and oil pipelines run through the country. Seen from the prism of EU's geopolitical interests, Turkey will remain important to Europe's energy security as it can help Brussels to diversify the transport corridors for energy supply, bypassing Russia as the main gas supplier.

Ankara is still one of the most important NATO members in Europe, providing crucial US and NATO air bases. Ankara's military contribution in the US- and NATO-led operations worldwide has been significant, and it still has the second-largest active-duty military within NATO. However, the three main fields of contradiction with the USA will further have a negative impact on the strategic partnership, as follows:

1) the military coup in 2016; 2) the Kurds

question within and outside Turkey; and 3) the selection of a missile defense system in favor of Russia's S-400.¹²

To sum it up, the challenges that arose from the shift in the bilateral relations between the USA and Turkey have become systemic and will likely lead to a long-term shift in Erdogan's foreign and security policy decisions, which most likely will lead to a deterioration in the relations with NATO but will create necessities for a more active Turkish policy in the shared neighborhood as well.

Conclusion

The Black Sea area and the shared neighborhood will remain a space of competitive agendas and a struggle for geopolitical influence, which creates a situation far from static. The trend is towards decreasing but more assertive Russia's and Turkey's influence and growing EU's and USA's participation in the region. This created a potential for complementary policy between Moscow and Ankara towards the shared neighbourhood. At the same time, the US and the EU approach began to differentiate from one another, as the USA put emphasis on the military buildup and exercises along the Eastern Flank of NATO members as well as defense cooperation with some countries in the region, while the EU focused more on the soft power agenda by promoting the political, economic and social transformation in the Eastern European countries, particularly in the three AA signatories. The biggest question mark for now is, how the Chinese participation in the region will evolve. It is to be assumed that China's interests in Eastern Europe are long-term and its actions will certainly reshuffle the regional dynamics. To summarize, the tendency is that the different approaches of the external actors will continue to compete with one another, making the geopolitical situation even more complex in the years to come.

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Endnotes

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