



**Regionalization and Globalization
in the European Economic Space**

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**CHALLENGES OF REGIONAL SECURITY
FOR CENTRAL AND EASTERN
EUROPEAN COUNTRIES**

Abstract

The paper analyzes the challenges of regional security for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in the context of modern geopolitical changes, particularly Russian aggression against Ukraine. The impact of security threats on the region's economic development, trade flows, and political stability is examined. Emphasis is placed on the importance of regional cooperation through formats such as the Visegrad Group, the Lublin Triangle, the Weimar Triangle, and the Bucharest Nine. The article explores changes in the defense budgets of CEE

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countries, their role in transforming energy policy, and their support for Ukraine. Adjustments in defense spending, made in response to growing security threats, are analyzed. Mechanisms for reorienting trade flows between CEE countries and Ukraine in the context of war are also studied. The authors highlight the importance of Ukraine's integration into the EU and NATO as a strategic element of European stability. Measures are proposed to strengthen regional cooperation, particularly in the areas of defense, energy, and economic policy. A roadmap has been developed to ensure long-term regional security by enhancing cooperation within the EU and NATO, countering Eurosceptic narratives, and integrating Ukraine into European and Euro-Atlantic structures.

Key Words:

CEE countries, defense budget, EU, EU market, export, import, integration, regional security, risks, trade flows, Visegrad Group.

JEL: F02, F10, F15, F42, H56, O52.

5 figures, 25 references.

Problem Statement and Literature Review

The past decades have been characterized by dynamic geopolitical changes, the necessity of maintaining a balance of power, and a growing need for the development of an effective security system. This is especially relevant for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), which have historically been at the crossroads of interests between global and regional players. The CEE countries face numerous challenges in the field of regional security, which directly affect their economies, political stability, and international relations. Since the end of the Cold War, the region has undergone significant transformations, yet new geopolitical threats – including military conflicts, energy security concerns, and economic risks – remain highly relevant.

The security of countries in this region is intricately linked to the development of transatlantic partnerships, the functioning of NATO and the European Union, as well as the preservation of stable relations with neighboring states. The role of regional security cooperation is increasing. Initiatives such as the Lublin Triangle (Ukraine-Poland-Lithuania), the Visegrad Group (Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary), and the Three Seas Initiative play a crucial role in strengthening defense capabilities, developing infrastructure, and ensuring the region's energy independence.

The primary challenge for the region remains Russia's full-scale military aggression against Ukraine and the annexation of Ukrainian territories in 2014. These events have caused a serious destabilization of the security environment in Central and Eastern Europe, threatening the borders of the EU and increasing the risk of armed conflicts in the region. Under the pressure of these threats, CEE countries have been forced to strengthen their defense capabilities by increasing military expenditures, modernizing their armed forces, and actively integrating into Western security structures.

Central and Eastern Europe remains in the global spotlight due to its immediate proximity to the war zone and its key role in the European security system.

In this context, it is essential to identify the security challenges faced by CEE countries and assess the measures taken to address these issues. The ongoing war, including occupation, has profound consequences – not only for the security and stability of the CEE region but for the entire world.

The purpose of the paper is to explore the challenges of regional security for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, analyze strategies for achieving stability in the region, and develop a roadmap for ensuring long-term regional security in the CEE.

The ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine has significantly reshaped the security architecture of Europe, forcing scholars to rethink the continent's strategic paradigms. Research by Tskhovrebadze et al. (2023) highlights how the conflict has escalated security threats not only at the regional but also at the global level. The paper emphasizes the need for European countries to adapt their security policies to new geopolitical challenges, particularly by increasing defense expenditures and preparing for emerging threats. Tampubolon (2022) examines the geopolitical consequences of the invasion, focusing on the disruption of global supply chains, rising energy costs, and inflation. The study also considers the side effects of international sanctions against Russia, which have impacted the global economy. Greminger & Vestner (2022) provide an analysis of the war's influence on global security across multiple aspects. Their study addresses topics such as international security law, arms control, cybersecurity, and the future of warfare. The research demonstrates how the conflict has reinforced pre-existing global trends, reshaped geopolitical alliances, and influenced diplomatic narratives. The geopolitical shifts and transformation of security following Russia's invasion of Ukraine are also examined in the works of Kusa (2022), Mahda (2024), and Hussain et al. (2023).

A broad spectrum of literature has been dedicated to the issue of regional security. The study by Lishchynskyy & Lyzun (2020) explores the conceptual frameworks of regional and global security governance. It systematizes various approaches to security management at both levels, emphasizing global governance mechanisms. The authors present their perspective on the interconnections between actors involved in global governance processes, highlighting the interplay between regional and global security. Amable (2022) investigates the evolution of security regions, offering an advanced theoretical model to address the complexities of 21st-century geopolitics.

Research on economic and financial development, as well as security challenges in Central and Eastern Europe, can be divided into two main directions (Bulatova et al., 2020). One focuses on national security issues within individual CEE countries. Surwillo & Slakaityte (2024) analyzes Poland's role in European security, challenging its perception as a secondary player in defense. The study underscores Poland's significant progress in military capabilities over the past 25 years, positioning it as a key actor in shaping the European security landscape. Rehtik & Mareš (2021) examine the approaches of the Czech and Slovak governments in countering Russian disinformation. Special attention is given to the impact of energy relations with Russia on these strategies. The study notes that the Czech Republic's security-oriented approach ensures a more objective assessment of threats and enhances resilience. Meanwhile, Slovakia prioritizes economic goals, particularly energy ties, which increases its vulnerability to disinformation. The study applies a rational decision-making model to analyze these differences, demonstrating the effectiveness of the Czech approach in countering disinformation threats. In their research, Kamola-Ciešlik & Akyesilmen (2024) compare the energy security policies of Poland and Hungary during Russia's war against Ukraine. Their study highlights Poland's active efforts to reduce dependence on Russian energy resources and underscores the differences in the priorities and strategies of these countries in addressing energy security challenges.

Furthermore, security studies include efforts to identify and analyze key components of security across the entire CEE region. Bocka (2022) outlines three primary security threats in Central Europe: Russia's destabilizing influence in the region, increasing energy security challenges, and risks associated with international terrorism, organized crime, and weak governance. Zięba (2023) examines the political and security landscape of the CEE region, focusing on contemporary challenges such as authoritarian tendencies and the militarization of security policies. The study highlights the interconnection between domestic political events and broader geopolitical dynamics, emphasizing the need to strengthen democratic institutions and security cooperation to counter emerging threats. Chirleşan (2012) analyzes the Euro-Atlantic security architecture and its impact on CEE countries. The study identifies the current state of regional security, key threats such as external aggression and hybrid threats, as well as the role of NATO and the EU in ensuring stability.

Methodology

The paper is dedicated to analyzing the complex parameters of regional security in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The geographical boundaries of the CEE region may vary depending on political, historical, geographical, or economic approaches. In this study, we adhere to the economic approach adopted by the EU, including Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) within the region. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods are applied in this study. Particular attention is given to documentary analysis, which allows for an assessment of the development trends of the examined phenomenon, as well as comparative analysis to identify best practices and opportunities for their adaptation. Based on information from international strategic documents, the key forms of regional cooperation among CEE countries are analyzed. Using data from the State Statistics Service of Ukraine, the study examines the role of CEE countries in Ukraine's international trade for the period 2020–2024. To assess the defense budgets of CEE countries, data from the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) for 2021–2024 are used. Based on the conducted analysis of geopolitical threats, a roadmap for ensuring long-term regional security in the CEE has been developed.

Research Results

The geopolitical landscape of the Central and Eastern European countries is characterized by complex and dynamic interactions shaped by their historical legacy, cultural diversity, and strategic geographical location. Recent years have been marked by escalating tensions and transformative events that have not only altered regional alliances but have also reshaped global power structures. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 became a turning point, triggering a large-scale humanitarian crisis and forcing the CEE countries – and the entire world – to reassess fundamental approaches to security, energy independence, and international diplomacy. As a result, the strategic balance in the region has shifted, military cooperation among allies has strengthened, and CEE governments have redefined their defense policies. Paradoxically, Russia's war against Ukraine, despite introducing new threats, has also opened a window of opportunity for the CEE region. A significant increase in investments in the military-industrial complex, a reorientation of energy flows away from Russian resources, and an expansion of transatlantic cooperation have become new vectors of development. Additionally, the region plays a leading role in providing military, economic, and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, further enhancing its strategic significance.

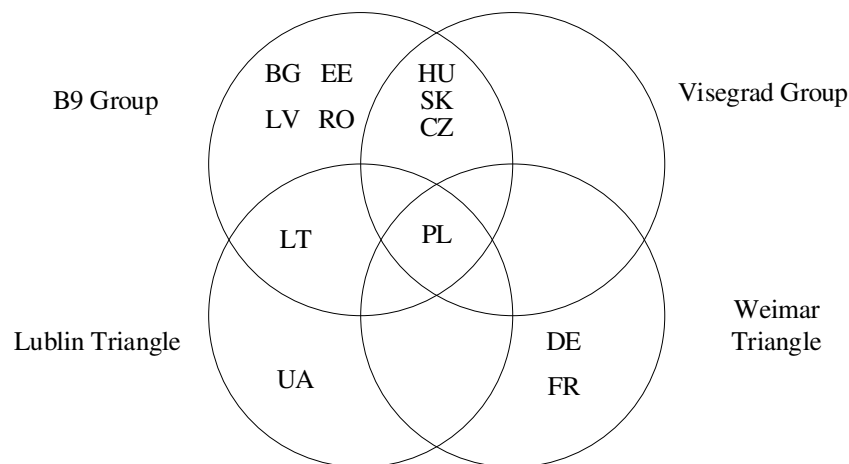
More than 30 years after the democratic transition, most Central and Eastern European states have firmly integrated into the Western institutional system. Their accession to the European Union and NATO was a defining choice that ensured their security, political stability, economic development, and strengthened their international influence. This strategic decision has been a key factor in the region's modernization, facilitating democratic progress, economic reforms, and the development of a shared European space.

For a long time, intra-regional cooperation in the CEE countries was largely seen as a secondary tool on the path to integration with the EU and NATO. Countries in the region prioritized direct relations with Western Europe over strengthening harmonious and balanced intra-regional cooperation. The consequences of this policy became evident in the mid-2010s when underdeveloped transport infrastructure severely hindered trade along the North-South axis (Kuznetsova et al., 2019). No single regional leader possesses sufficient power to independently influence Western political institutions, and overall, the CEE region remains too weak in terms of economic production, innovation, and internal cohesion. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has mobilized solidarity among CEE countries yet exposed numerous divisions. For instance, Hungary has become an «outsider» within the EU and NATO, distancing itself from direct support for Ukraine and reluctantly agreeing to EU sanctions packages against Russia. The Polish government, despite playing an active role in supporting Ukraine, has faced difficulties in forming broad trans-European coalitions due to disputes with the European Commission and certain Western European states.

It is worth noting that regional cooperation in the 1990s played a crucial role in coordinating the 2004 EU enlargement process. Mechanisms such as the Visegrad Group and the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) not only facilitated economic convergence but provided a platform for aligning positions on integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures. Today, active coordination could play a decisive role in advancing regional interests, particularly in strengthening NATO's eastern flank and further expanding the EU and the Alliance, including Ukraine's accession.

Currently, the key formats of regional cooperation among CEE countries remain the Visegrad Group (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia), the Bucharest Nine (Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia), and the Lublin Triangle (Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine). Additionally, the Weimar Triangle (France, Germany, Poland) holds significant importance as it facilitates coordination between the CEE countries and the leading EU states (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Regional cooperation alliances in Central and Eastern Europe

Source: Warsaw Security Forum (2023).

The development of regional cooperation forms can enhance the region's influence in European and global politics and contribute to the consolidation of efforts in defense, energy independence, and economic cooperation. This is becoming increasingly relevant amid growing geopolitical challenges and the need to strengthen European security.

CEE countries play a key role in Ukraine's foreign trade relations, ensuring a significant volume of trade turnover. Following the full-scale Russian invasion, their share in Ukraine's foreign trade has significantly increased due to the reorientation of export-import flows, deepening economic cooperation, and Ukraine's integration into European markets (Lyzun, Vitálišová & Borseková, 2024). Moreover, such changes contribute to both strengthening Ukraine's economic resilience and expanding strategic partnerships with the region's countries.

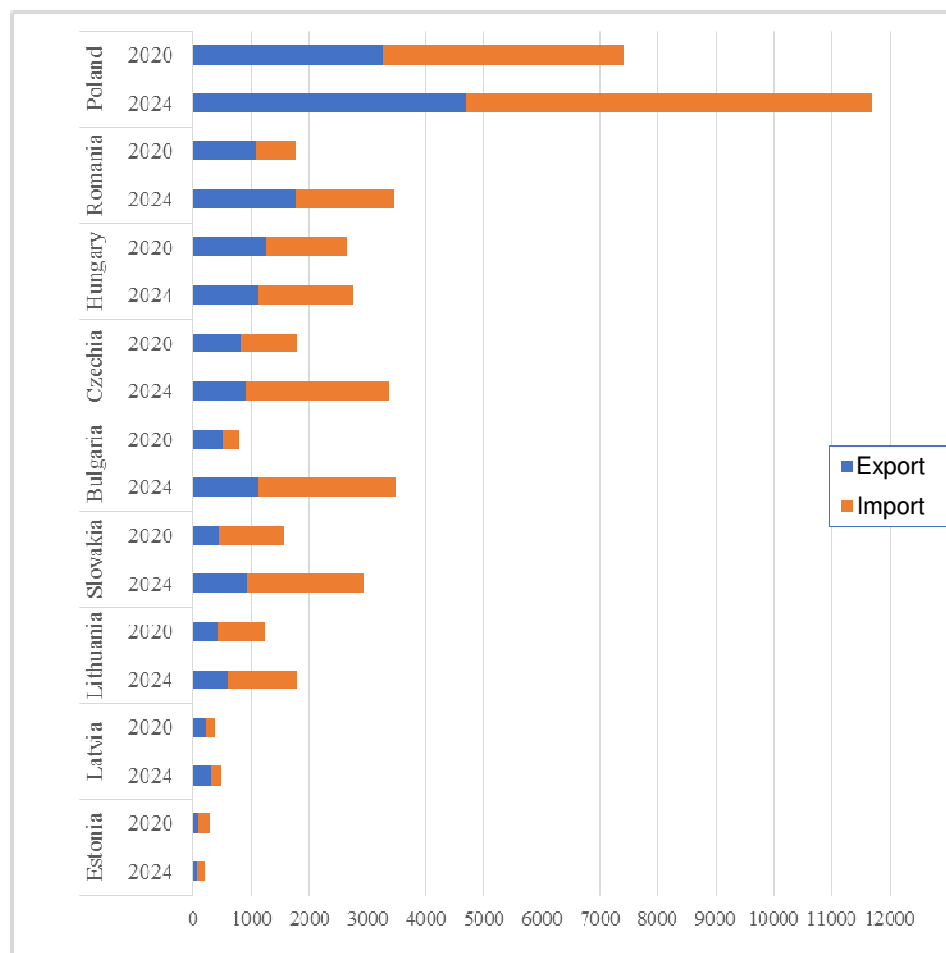
Ukrainian exports to the region increased by 42%, reaching \$11.59 billion. The main export markets for Ukrainian goods became Poland, Romania, and Czech Republic, indicating the active integration of Ukrainian products into European economic chains.

However, imports from CEE countries to Ukraine grew even more rapidly, rising by 91% to \$18.67 billion. The main importing countries were Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia. The sharp increase was driven by the expansion of trade

relations, the need for imports of critically important goods, and the strengthening of economic cooperation with the EU (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Export and import of CEE countries with Ukraine

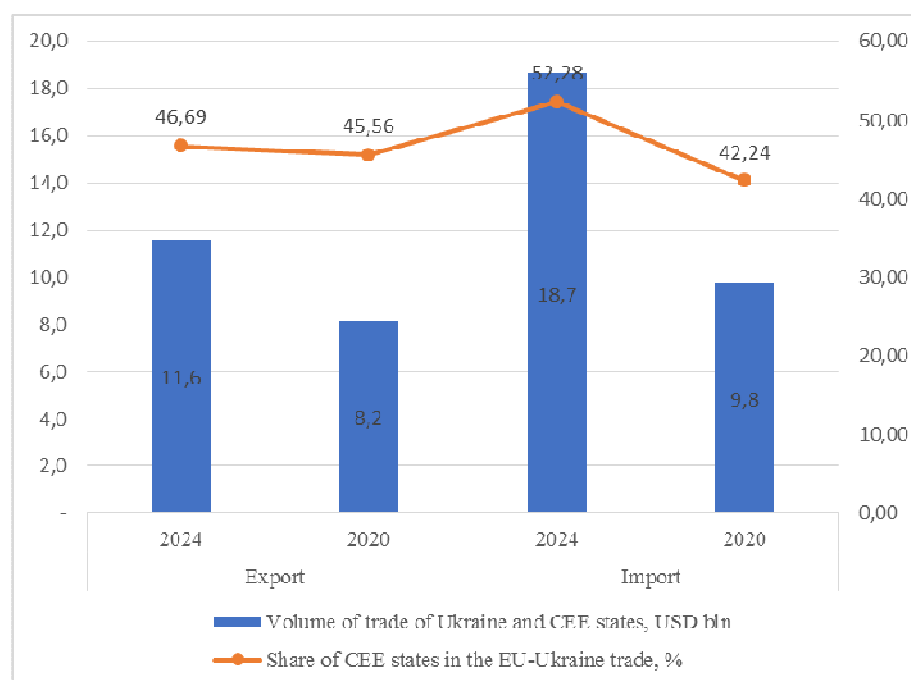


Source: formed by the authors based on the data of the State Statistics Service of Ukraine (2025).

The total trade turnover between Ukraine and the CEE countries in 2024 increased to \$30.26 billion, which is nearly 70% higher than in 2020. The largest contributions to this growth came from Poland, Czechia, Romania, and Slovakia, which have become Ukraine's key partners in the region. Particularly notable is the strengthening of trade relations with Poland: in 2024, the volume of bilateral trade reached \$11.69 billion, almost twice as much as in 2020 (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Share of CEE countries in trade between Ukraine and EU countries



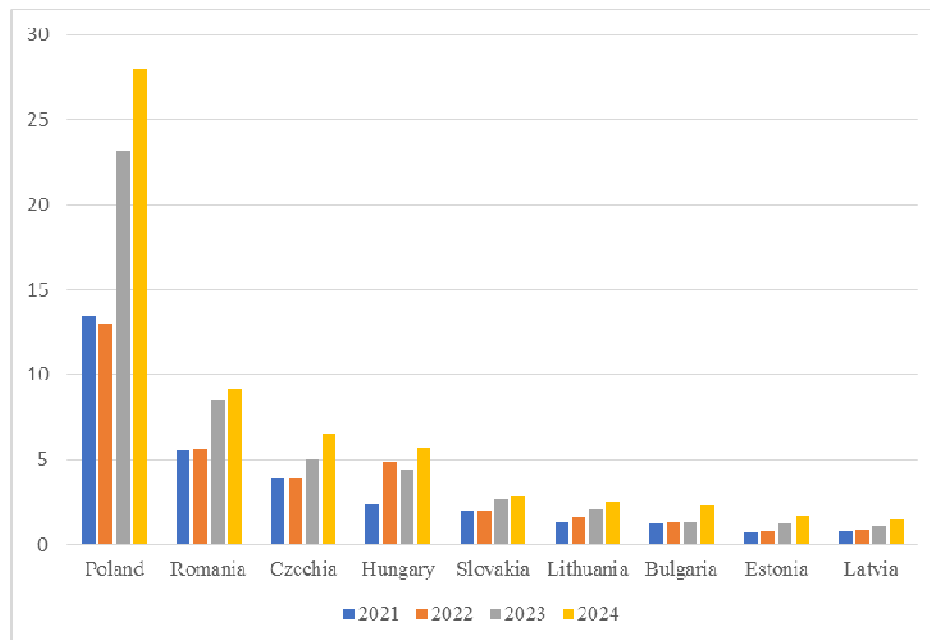
Source: formed by the authors based on the data of the State Statistics Service of Ukraine (2025).

In general, the analysis indicates a significant shift in Ukraine's trade orientation. The rapid growth in trade volumes with Central and Eastern European countries highlights not only Ukraine's economic adaptation to new realities but also its deeper integration into the European market.

Discussions within the EU and the United Kingdom are actively being held on the possibility of establishing a pan-European defense financing mechanism aimed at strengthening the military capabilities of their countries. This initiative is becoming increasingly relevant amid growing security challenges and the need of enhancement the defense readiness of European states. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, European countries, particularly those in CEE, have reassessed their defense budgets (Figure 4). Poland has significantly increased its military spending, exceeding 4% of GDP, making it the highest among the U.S. allies in Europe. Considering that U.S. President Donald Trump has proposed that NATO member states raise their defense expenditures to 5% of GDP, the issue of financing military needs has become one of the key priorities for the EU.

Figure 4

Defense budget of CEE countries (billion USD, current prices)



Source: formed by the authors based on the data of McGerty, & Dewey (2025), World Bank Group (2025) and Eurostat (2025).

Allocating increased resources to defense funding has the potential to stimulate economic growth and drive industrial modernization across Europe, provided these investments are channeled into high-tech military innovations. According to calculations by experts from the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, Europe's GDP could grow by 0.9–1.5% annually if annual defense spending increases from 2% of GDP to 3.5% of GDP. As of 2024, the average defense spending level in European countries still falls short of NATO's target of 2% of GDP. However, to achieve the maximum economic impact, the transition from importing weapons is essential – currently sourced primarily from the United States – to developing domestic production and expanding the innovative potential of Europe's defense-industrial complex.

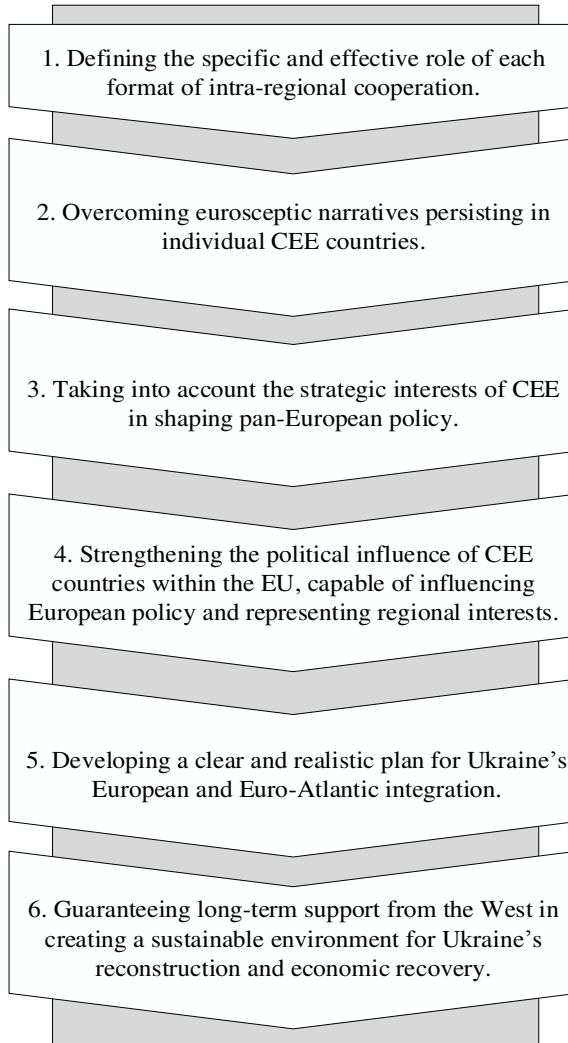
Thus, one of the most important vectors of European defense policy is creating conditions for the development of domestic military technology production. Currently, around 80% of defense procurements by EU countries are made through suppliers outside the European Union (Diplomatic mission of Ukraine to the European Union, 2024). The lack of domestic production reduces opportunities for technology spillovers, where defense innovations contribute to advancements in the civilian technology sector and overall economic productivity. Experts estimate that if Europe can independently develop the next generation of military technologies and weaponry, additional defense expenditure would have a long-term positive impact on economic growth. Increasing military spending from 2% to 3.5% of GDP would require approximately €300 billion annually.

Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, the rise of hybrid threats, energy dependence, as well as the need to strengthen defense capabilities demand a strategic approach to ensure long-term regional stability. CEE countries are crucial in the new European security architecture, but they need coordinated and unified actions to protect their interests effectively. Joint initiatives, enhanced coordination within the EU and NATO, and active support for Ukraine as a stronghold of European security are becoming increasingly critical. The shifting geopolitical environment, escalating security threats, and the need for the consolidation of efforts among Central and Eastern European countries in response to these challenges underscore the urgency of developing a roadmap for guaranteeing long-term regional security in the CEE (Figure 5).

The roadmap for ensuring long-term regional security in CEE countries includes the following steps:

1. Defining the specific and effective role of each format of intra-regional cooperation. Regional cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe plays a crucial role in ensuring security and stability in the region. However, there is a need for a clear definition of the functional focus of existing cooperation platforms to maximize their potential. Notably, the Visegrad Group, Bucharest Nine, Three Seas Initiative, and Lublin Triangle possess the necessary instruments to enhance regional security. The Visegrad Group serves as a cooperation platform within the EU, though its effectiveness requires improvement due to political divergences

Figure 5

Roadmap for ensuring long-term regional security in CEE countries

Source: compiled by authors.

among member states (Kuryliak & Savelyev, 2020). Bucharest Nine is a stronghold for reinforcing NATO's eastern flank, with the potential to expand its coordination mechanisms. The Lublin Triangle plays a crucial role in supporting Ukraine and facilitating its integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures (Parakhonskyi & Yavorska, 2024). Clearly defining roles and activating activities will reduce duplicated efforts and improve regional cooperation efficiency.

2. Overcoming Eurosceptic narratives in certain CEE countries. Some CEE countries still experience Euroscepticism, driven by domestic politics, populist rhetoric, and external disinformation campaigns, despite the significant economic benefits of EU integration. To counter Eurosceptic sentiments, it is necessary to conduct an active information campaign emphasizing the advantages of EU membership, including financial support, an open labor market, and access to structural funds. The solution to this issue will also be facilitated by engaging civil society in discussions on EU policies and countering disinformation spread by pro-Russian media.

3. Considering CEE strategic interests in shaping EU-wide policy. Despite the strategic significance of CEE for European security, Western European countries often overlook their interests, particularly regarding defense, energy, and foreign policy. This situation poses risks for the region, as strategic decisions are made without considering its specific security needs. The task for CEE countries is to actively promote their interests through joint initiatives within the EU and NATO. Strengthening cooperation with France and Germany within the Weimar Triangle can help achieve this goal. Furthermore, establishing and improving dialogue with European institutions, clearly articulating their positions, and demonstrating the region's role as a stronghold of stability against the Russian threat will be of immense importance.

4. Strengthening the political influence of CEE countries within the EU to shape European policy and represent regional interests. Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries must enhance their representation within European Union (EU) governing bodies, including the European Commission and the European Parliament, to exert a major influence on European policy formulation and decision-making processes. Such participation will enable more effective lobbying for regional interests within the EU and influence relevant decisions. Additionally, CEE countries should develop a joint economic strategy that will enhance their influence in European economic processes. Specifically, coordination in the fields of energy, defense, and digital technologies can strengthen the region's position as a key player in Europe.

5. Forming a clear and realistic plan for Ukraine's European and Euro-Atlantic integration. Given the current situation – the war between Russia and Ukraine – the security of the CEE region is intricately linked to Ukraine's integration into the EU and NATO. To achieve this, it is necessary to develop a clear mechanism for CEE countries to support Ukraine's accession to European and Euro-Atlantic structures, with specific criteria and stages. Strengthening defense

cooperation between Ukraine and CEE countries, including arms supplies, joint military exercises, and intelligence sharing, is an essential prerequisite for this process.

6. Guaranteeing long-term Western support in creating a stable environment for Ukraine's reconstruction and economic recovery. The guarantees of long-term Western support for Ukraine are based on geopolitical, political, economic, and social factors, making it not only a political decision, yet rather a strategic necessity for the stability of Europe and global security. Furthermore, after the war, Ukraine will require sustained Western support to rebuild its economy, modernize infrastructure, and strengthen its defense capabilities. Without adequate financial and technological assistance from the EU and the US, Ukraine could become a weak link in Europe's security architecture. Long-term assistance could be provided through the creation of a special Ukraine Reconstruction Fund, attracting private investors, and ensuring Ukraine's integration into the European economic system.

Conclusions

After February 24, 2022, the core of European security shifted eastward.

Today, CEE countries require new momentum to redefine their shared interests, strengthen their influence in international forums, and initiate large-scale joint projects related to the increasing importance of security and defense. Numerous cooperation frameworks, such as the Bucharest Nine, Visegrad Group, Lublin Triangle, and Weimar Triangle, serve distinct functions and collectively aim to enhance regional security. The strategic interests of Central and Eastern Europe should adopt an initiative-taking approach to issues that extend beyond regional confines.

The security of Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries is directly correlated with regional economic prosperity. Integration into Western institutions provides new EU and NATO members with enhanced protection while simultaneously fostering democratic development and a robust economic framework. Ukraine's European and transatlantic integration is essential for ensuring CEE security and reducing the long-term threat posed by Russia to the entire region. CEE countries have a positive track record from the 1990s of establishing formalized regional structures that foster intra-regional cooperation and enhance trade relations. Currently, Ukraine needs to be integrated into these regional cooperation formats to achieve its strategic goals.

Thus, ensuring long-term security in Central and Eastern Europe requires active regional cooperation, stronger ties with Western Europe and the United States, and continued support for Ukraine as a key pillar of European stability.

The implementation of the strategic roadmap for enduring regional security in Central and Eastern European (CEE) nations will not only provide continuous security but also position the region as a critical center of influence within both European and global political arenas.

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