

Central Europe on Russia-Ukraine Conflict

Positions and Responses

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The article analyses the positions of the Visegrad Group and the Baltic countries on the Russia-Ukraine conflict that erupted in 2014. The public discourse about the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is affected by the following main factors in these countries: historical heritage, concern for their own safety, the current political situation, economic and financial interests of transatlantic relations. The authors prove that Poland, Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia are united by the perception that the Russian aggression in Ukraine is a threat to their national security, they support tough policy of anti-Russian sanctions on the international arena and assist Ukraine at the level of declarations and activities. Nonetheless, the level of their participation and support for Ukraine depends upon their actual capabilities and domestic and foreign policy priorities. Reactions of other V4 countries to events in Ukraine are more restrained. The evaluation of origins and consequences of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict by Slovakia, Hungary and the Czech Republic is mostly based on the context of personal political preferences of individual leaders, energy and, in general, economic relations with Russia along with the anti-liberal, anti-American and Eurosceptical rhetoric of some political forces.

Keywords: Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Ukrainian crisis, Central European states, sanctions, condemnation

Tetiana Sydoruk, Dmytro Tyshchenko. Central Europe on Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Positions and Responses. *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* 12, no. 3: 81–105.



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Introduction

Positions and interests of the Member States perform a significant role in creation and implementation of foreign policy of the European Union. This stems primarily from the restrictions associated with unanimity voting in the Council of the European Union and the European Council on the basic amount of foreign policy and security issues. In most cases, it is necessary to achieve consensus amongst the Member States on certain actions and decisions of the EU. However, such consensus repeatedly acquired forms of 'rotten compromise'¹ significantly limiting the effectiveness of the joint activities. For example, very ambitious Polish-Swedish proposals upon an 'Eastern Partnership' had come to naught after the Member States in the EU institutions managed to reach a consensus. Otherwise, this could have made a great contribution to the current European Neighbourhood Policy. The position of the EU on the international stage is, therefore, often 'the lowest common denominator' and its elaborating process is long; the energy is being used to resolve internal disputes, rather than forming a strong common position in relation to other states. Consequently, the consensus is often the result of nothing more than a political compromise.

The positions of the Member States are very important for the formation of the EU's comprehensive long-term strategy, which would aim at strengthening Ukrainian statehood and its integration into Europe and coherent EU policy towards Russia in the conditions of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Accordingly, it is crucial to understand the seriousness of the differences between the Member States and the instruments of influence on the current situation.

The Russia-Ukraine military conflict demonstrates weak cohesion of Europe to external threats. Its main reason is, without a shadow of a doubt, a divergence of interests of EU members in terms of their foreign policy priorities in general and towards Eastern Europe in particular. American realist Robert Kagan notes on this occasion:

Even the Europeans of the 21st century, despite all the advantages of their union, unable to unite against a predator in their environment and, like in the past, willing to give at the mercy of the weakest to save their own (financial) skins.²

In our opinion, such a verdict is exaggerated and perhaps premature. Although there are doubts and some EU countries do not approve, say,

increased economic sanctions and other restrictive measures towards Russia, the result in the end is clear – none of the Member States dared veto the joint action of EU position on these issues. The EU countries reaching a common position on rejection of the Russian actions in Ukraine and the imposition of economic restrictive measures in respect of common agreement of all 28 Member States is a significant achievement. On 21st December 2017, the Council of the European Union prolonged economic sanctions targeting specific sectors of the Russian economy until 31st July 2018.³

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It has become, though, more difficult to maintain this consensus. Critical asymmetries have been growing between the Member States in the issue of continuation of the sanctions even without mentioning the imposition of new restrictive measures on Russia. No differences in the positions are as evident as in Central Europe, which seemingly would have showed similar assessment and a common response to the crisis.

The Visegrad Four countries and the Baltic States were surprisingly divided in relation to the conflict's sides. Their reaction to the events in Ukraine was not unanimous despite the common history as Soviet satellites, and (for most of them) being occupied by Moscow in the twentieth century, the recent experience of their transformation, good understanding of contemporary Eastern Europe and Russia, geographical proximity to the conflict area, deep historic, cultural, social and economic ties with their neighbours in the East. Poland and the Baltic States took up the most rigid and principled position on the Ukrainian crisis, annexation of Crimea by Russia and the following military campaign in Donbas. Each state has its own internal motives for such behaviour associated primarily with their recent history. In contrast, the response of the Southern part of Central Europe to the events in Ukraine was more restrained. It ranges from cautious condemnation in Slovakia to clear pro-Russian voices in the Czech Republic and Hungary.

The debates in the EU on sanctions against Russia have deepened the differences between the countries of Central Europe, and particularly the Visegrad Four (V4) countries and the Baltic States. Warsaw, Tallinn and Vilnius are appealing to deepen restrictive measures against Russia and exclude it from the SWIFT system and even expressed willingness to supply weapons to Ukraine; Prague, Bratislava and Budapest openly declared their doubts about the effectiveness of

sanctions. Moreover, the countries have been pointing out the negative effects on their own and other EU countries, and strongly opposing the military assistance to Ukraine. It is clear that the factor of their energy and financial dependence on Russia plays an extremely important role here. Their post-war history, dependence on Moscow via Warsaw Pact and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance should have at least contributed, though, to a greater understanding of the potential threats from the Kremlin. The diversity of views and reactions from Central Europe casts doubt on its ability to act as an internal advocate for the eastern neighbours within the EU and weakens the EU's ability to respond effectively to the spiral of violence in Ukraine.

The positions of the Visegrad Four and the Baltic countries during the crisis in Ukraine and the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and their role in shaping a common EU position on these issues have become the subject of attention of a number of authors. Anna Kyrydon and Serhiy Troian,⁴ Mihał Baranowski and Bartosz Cichoński⁵ analysed the position and activities of Poland towards both sides of the conflict. Vytis Jurkonis,⁶ Merle Maigre,⁷ Kristine Berzina⁸ studied the activities of the Baltic States. As to the Visegrad countries, Alfred Kramer,⁹ András Racz,¹⁰ Frank Markowicz¹¹ scrutinised the policy and stance of the V4 thoroughly and in general. Alexander Duleba,¹² Mateusz Gniazdowski¹³ concentrated on the positions of separate countries of the group.

Even though the conflict in Ukraine is still ongoing and the approaches of the countries of Central Europe on it undergo certain modifications, the analysis remains relevant scientific task. In view of the above mentioned, in this article we aim to reveal the reasons and substantiate the factors underlying the different and often conflicting positions of the Visegrad Group and Baltic countries on the crisis in Ukraine and the Russia-Ukraine conflict. We focus on differences in political attitudes and public debate to assess causes of the conflict that range from the aggression of Russia (Poland, Lithuania) to civil war (Czech Republic) and approaches on the need of implications of EU sanctions against Moscow. We argue that the following main factors have the most effect on the public discourse on Russian-Ukrainian conflict in V4 and Baltic States: historical heritage, concern for their own safety, the current political situation, economic/financial interests, and transatlantic relations.

The article consists of three parts. The first part discloses the results of research on approaches of the countries that took the most

strict and principled position on the “Ukrainian crisis”, annexation of Crimea by Russia and escalation of the conflict in eastern Ukraine (Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia). In the second part, we provide results of this study on “Russia’s proponents” in V4. In the third part, we compare the differences between these two groups of countries. From there, the article clarifies the significant differences in political and public debates on the conflict in Ukraine, important nuances in the energy sector and economic relations with Russia, personal political preferences and priorities of foreign policy of the leaders of V4 and the Baltic states in relation to Ukraine and Russia. This may contribute to the discussion about how to resolve the conflict and the extension and the consequences of European sanctions against Moscow.

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The Positions of Hawks

The earliest and most principled positions on the ‘Ukrainian crisis’, the annexation of Crimea by Russia and escalation of the conflict in eastern Ukraine were formulated by Poland, Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia. The positions were formed under the influence of various factors. The first component implies the states’ security. For these countries, the aggression of Russia in Ukraine has exacerbated the security situation in the Baltic-Black Sea region and raised questions about the security of the NATO member states via collective defence. Strong transatlantic ties are another essential factor that determines the formation of the positions of Poland and the Baltic countries on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. It is important to note that the US presence in Europe is seen as guaranteeing peace, security and stability in the region. Accordingly, from the very beginning, it was important that the EU and the United States agreed on common positions and actions, including the issue of sanctions against Russia. The last but not the least important factor is that Ukraine is an important target country for Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in context of the Eastern Partnership. Moreover, the aforementioned Partnership was previously prioritised since the largest portion of aid for development was transferred to the countries of the Eastern Partnership. We will consider the positions and activities of each country in relation to the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Poland

Poland has responded to the crisis in Ukraine since its early days. The Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius, the question of signing the

Association Agreement with Ukraine and prevention of further violence in Ukraine were central issues in Polish bilateral and multilateral negotiations with the Ukrainian government and its EU and NATO partners. Polish then-Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski, along with his French and German counterparts, was an intermediary in negotiations between the protesters and the President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich on 20th February 2014 aiming at ending the violence and encouraging the dialogue between Euromaidan and V. Yanukovich. However, despite its early activity and practical action, Poland was not included into the 'Normandy format', a framework of negotiations between Germany, France, Ukraine and Russia on tackling the Russia-Ukraine conflict established in June 2014 in Normandy, France, during the celebration of the 70th anniversary of Operation Overlord. The format operates mainly through telephone calls between the heads of states and respective foreign ministers.

Then-President Bronisław Komorowski and Prime Minister Donald Tusk, Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski and Defence Minister Tomasz Siemoniak condemned the annexation of Crimea and the Russian aggression in eastern Ukraine. B. Komorowski, in an interview with German radio stations on 30th August 2014, stated the Russian invasion in Ukraine, warned Europe on the policy of appeasement of Russia, supported sanctions against Moscow, and called for the strengthening the eastern flank of NATO.¹⁴

From then on, Poland has focused primarily on actions that could be implemented by the European and transatlantic organisations in response to Russia's behaviour. Within the European Union, Poland supported the visa restrictions and economic sanctions against Moscow, and their expansion in response to the continuing military aggression of Russia against Ukraine; within NATO, Poland actively advocated for confirmation guarantees of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty through practical steps to strengthen the territorial security of the eastern areas of the Alliance. Poland defended the idea of increasing presence of the allied troops on the northeast side during the preparations for the NATO Wales Summit in September 2014.

Poland has allocated €100 million credit assistance to Ukraine and €2.5 million to the scholarship programme for students of the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, and Crimea (in 2015). More than \$1 million was also provided as humanitarian assistance. The Polish government

also allocated €170 000 for treatment and rehabilitation of Ukrainian militants (85 people).¹⁵

As to the military assistance to Kyiv, Warsaw did not take a clear position. It is willing to sell weapons to Ukraine but does not take any specific decisions on this matter. The continuous discussions on the weapon supply to Ukraine showed that when it comes to the military aspects of the conflict, the Polish reaction to the Russian invasion into Ukraine is not univocal.

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Such situation caused a barrage of criticism of the government for allegedly drifting in the conflict in Ukraine. Namely, Poland agreed to limit its military assistance to Ukraine with non-lethal equipment, it postponed the entry into force the fourth chapter of the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU related to the deep and comprehensive free trade area, and more than modest results of the NATO summit in Wales. Zbigniew Bujak, one of the Solidarity leaders, labelled the passivity of the Polish authorities on Ukraine as 'treason'.¹⁶

The behaviour of the Polish Governments of D. Tusk and E. Kopacz followed a certain logic: Poland will not affect upon the resolution of the conflict in Ukraine, the best that the Polish government can do is act systematically with partners in the EU and NATO. As former Prime Minister Eva Kopacz said in her address to the Sejm on 1st October 2014: '[...] it is important to prevent the isolation of Poland as a result of unrealistic targets set themselves'.¹⁷ Another statement was made by Grzegorz Schetyna, successor of Radosław Sikorski as foreign minister, towards the Sejm on 6th November 2014:

The rush of isolationism and anti-Western sentiments and denial of European values will build a wall that will separate Russia from Europe. Critical assessment of the policy of Russia does not change the fact that we will remain neighbours and economic partners (p. 36).¹⁸

This position is not surprising, taking into consideration that at the beginning of the first term, the Tusk government's Eastern policy was based upon the fact that open scepticism towards the EU co-operation with Russia and too much ambition on EU relations with Ukraine could lead to isolation of Poland on the international arena, as it had been under the previous 2005-2008 government. Hence, the Polish government offered Russia a "normalisation" in 2008, hoping that it would return Poland in the mainstream of the policies of the EU and NATO and improve its position in these organisations. Some subse-

quent events may indicate that this assumption was correct, including the election of Tusk as President of the European Council.

Inauguration of the newly elected President of Poland Andrzej Duda from the opposition party 'Law and Justice' (won the second round of presidential elections on 24th May 2015) was held on 6th August 2015. The new president has declared its intention to make deep adjustments to the foreign policy of the country. Because of winning the parliamentary elections of 25th October 2015, the Law and Justice Party obtained the opportunity to form a government. The new Prime Minister was the party vice chairlady Beata Szydło.

Nonetheless, despite the drastic changes in the echelons of power, Poland has not changed geopolitical course towards Ukraine, as the country is its closest neighbour. In addition, Poland cannot conduct independent foreign policy because it is a member of the EU and NATO. However, one can still talk about some important changes in the Polish position on the situation in Ukraine. Firstly, Andrzej Duda put forward an initiative to expand the Normandy format by having Poland and possibly other countries join the negotiations.¹⁹ The reason for this is an idea of exhaustion (the need for optimisation) of the format and the need for continued negotiations. Secondly, unlike some other Western allies of Ukraine, Andrzej Duda believes the option of freezing the conflict in eastern Ukraine is completely unacceptable, because it would mean a permanent source of possible threat for Europe.²⁰ Thirdly, the Polish President is consistent in his plans to return to the idea of 'Intermarium' (the concept of Józef Piłsudski) that is associated with creation of a confederation of the states of Central and Eastern Europe, the Baltic states, Ukraine and Belarus.²¹

Taking into consideration circumstances where the Baltic and CEE countries are members of the EU while Ukraine is not even a candidate for EU membership, not to mention the sensitive international position of Belarus, it is evident that the prospects for the implementation of this project are quite bleak. However, despite the unsuccessful rhetoric the idea of strengthening co-operation, especially a military one between Ukraine and the CEE and Baltic countries, is very important. Fourthly, Poland's position in relation to the Russian Federation looks now even tougher, less dependent on Berlin and more focused on the US.²² Fifthly, the "Law and Justice" party is largely Eurosceptic and insists on a stricter policy of Poland within the EU. This Euroscepticism has already affected the politics of Poland in the EU, as well Warsaw-Berlin

political relations.²³ Therefore, the question is whether Poland can be an *advocate* for Ukraine in the EU in the absence of constructive relations with Brussels and Berlin. Finally, after “Law and Justice” came into power, disputes in bilateral relations with Ukraine have appeared in terms of disagreements on certain historical periods. On 22nd July 2016, the Polish Parliament (Sejm) adopted a resolution declaring 11th July a National Day of Remembrance of Victims of Genocide perpetrated by Ukrainian nationalists against Poles during World War II.²⁴ As the resolution text says, ‘[...] *citizens of the Second Republic were brutally murdered by Ukrainian nationalists.*’²⁵ The unprecedented cooling in relations between Poland and Ukraine in the entire period of the Ukrainian independence occurred after this resolution raises a question of whether the *advocate* of Ukraine in Europe become its ‘prosecutor’ and what consequences it will have for bilateral relations for the position of Poland on Ukraine and Russia in the conflict in eastern Ukraine.²⁶

Despite the importance of the official position of Warsaw, an extremely high level of support of Ukraine by the Polish public should be noted. Many Poles, journalists, politicians, diplomats, students, human rights activists and volunteers have become direct participants of Euromaidan and events in eastern Ukraine. According to surveys of the Transatlantic Trends Fund, 78% of Poles are in favour of economic assistance to Ukraine, 77% support sanctions against Russia, and 67% support aid to Ukraine, even if it increases the danger of conflict with Russia.²⁷ Jarek Podworski, a member of association “Generation” in Katowice, organizer of humanitarian convoys to the Maidan and ATO combatants, points out:

In Poland, foremost the society worried about Ukraine, not the state ... We were collecting warm clothes and money to the Maidan and ATO. This was not done by the state, but by donations of ordinary Poles, private foundations and volunteers...²⁸

Lithuania

The active role of Lithuania during the crisis in Ukraine and in conditions of the Russia-Ukraine conflict is not accidental. Lithuania has been a supporter of Ukraine for many years for reasons that range from its own diplomatic ambitions to sincere belief that Ukraine has always been and should remain part of Europe. Lithuania defends the interests of Ukraine in various international organisations and supports it

on a bilateral level, as evidenced by numerous visits by politicians and senior Lithuanian officials in Ukraine. It is necessary to note an unprecedented participation of the Lithuanian civil society in Ukrainian events that started with local solidarity actions with the Euromaidan and later manifested in voluntary missions of doctors, charity concerts aiming to support Ukraine.

The substantial Lithuanian support for Ukraine is the logical result of its priorities and long-term efforts in the countries of the Eastern neighbourhood. Guided by the concept of “smart power”, Lithuania has been consistently increasing its international subjectivity and diplomatic capacity. Thus, even before it was one of the most outspoken critics of Russia’s actions in Georgia in 2008 and the main opponent of the EU to resume negotiations with Russia on a new agreement on partnership and co-operation after Russia failed its obligations according to the ‘Medvedev-Sarkozy plan’. On the eve of the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius in 2013, Lithuanian diplomats were active in European capitals to provide the historical possibility of signing the Association Agreement with Ukraine, and in Kyiv, they were urging the same from the Ukrainian leadership. After the summit, Lithuanian politicians made some official visits to Ukraine: 4th December 2013 – the Speaker of the Lithuanian Parliament Loreta Grauzinienė, 13 December – Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevičius. Public support of the Ukrainians was also high. Many Lithuanians came to Kyiv on weekends during Euromaidan, and civil society organisations sent buses with solidarity groups and musicians with concerts in support of the Revolution of Dignity. Lithuania provided medical care for victims of violence in Ukraine. Government and individuals covered medical expenses of more than 60 Ukrainians, including treatment provided to Dmytro Bulatov, Head of Automaidan. Many other activists received long-term visas and some of them used the opportunity to escape in Lithuania and join solidarity actions there.²⁹

Presiding in the UN Security Council, Lithuania initiated an emergency meeting on the crisis in Ukraine in February 2014 and subsequently remained active in this matter not only at the UN but also in the institutions of the EU, NATO, and OSCE. Lithuania unequivocally condemns Russian aggression against Ukraine, claims the responsibility for the events in Ukraine, accuses Russia of supporting terrorists, and insists on the recognition of LNR and DNR as terrorist organisations. Lithuania supports anti-Russian sanctions and their expan-

sion, and defends the introduction of a military embargo on Russia, criticises the ‘weak’ position of the West regarding Ukraine; declares possible introduction of national anti-Russian sanctions; is willing to supply arms to Ukraine and the Ukrainian military conduct training in Lithuania. Perhaps none of the European leaders can compete with Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė on the severity of comments addressed to Russia.

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The President of Lithuania condemned the Russian invasion in eastern Ukraine in August 2014. She noted it was a breach of international peace and security and proposed to classify Russia’s actions as a war against Europe. ‘*Russia is in a state of war against Ukraine and that is against a country which wants to be part of Europe. Russia is practically in a state of war against Europe*’, stated the President before the European Council in Brussels.³⁰ In an interview in November 2014, the Lithuanian President called Russia a terrorist state and said if Russia was not stopped in Ukraine, the aggression could spread to Europe: ‘[...] *today Ukraine is fighting a war on behalf of all Europe*’.³¹

Lithuania allocated €50 000 to the NATO Trust Fund for Ukraine and provided assistance to the Ukrainian army for €43 500. The state provides monthly treatment and rehabilitation of Ukrainian soldiers and civilians from the Anti-Terrorist Operation Zone (ATO); supplies with helmets, body armour, bulletproof panels, dry rations and medical supplies for the Ukrainian military. Lithuanian humanitarian assistance to Ukraine exceeded 250 000 euro.³² Together with Poland, Lithuania created the Polish-Lithuanian-Ukrainian brigade “LITPOLUKRBRIG” (Ukraine – 545 soldiers, Poland - 3000, Lithuania - 150-350); it also trains members of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, joint military exercises and treatment of military personnel.³³

There are many reasons that explain this position of Lithuania. Despite the fact that it is part of the Euro-Atlantic community as a member of NATO and the EU, it has repeatedly felt pressure from Russia. This varied from attempts to influence individual politicians to numerous barriers in trade, business and communications on the border with Russia, not to mention the constant attempts to manipulate the historical memory of Lithuania.

Estonia

The first official reaction of Estonia to the “Ukrainian crisis” was made after the bloody clashes in Kyiv on 18th-20th February 2014. President

Toomas Hendrik Ilves issued a statement insisting on ceasing the violent situation in Kyiv and starting a political dialogue between government and opposition. He warned that Estonia was ready to support sanctions against those responsible for violence. In March 2014 in response to Russia's actions in Ukraine, the National Council of Defence of Estonia at an extraordinary meeting called for strong countermeasures from the EU and NATO. A few days later, Foreign Minister Urmas Paet stated that Russia's actions and threats against Ukraine violate the UN Charter and endanger peace and security in Europe. In the same month, the Parliament of Estonia adopted a statement in support of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine.³⁴

Estonia supports sanctions against Russia and has provided an assistance package to Ukraine in various European and Euro-Atlantic forums. In late August 2014, when a significant number of Russian combat troops entered eastern Ukraine, Toomas Hendrik Ilves insisted that it should finally dispel any doubts as to Russia's participation in the conflict.³⁵ In September 2014, he visited Kyiv to express support for the country towards political and economic reforms. The Estonian president during a meeting with Ukrainian leader said that the Ukrainian-Russian conflict is '*a war between Europe and non-Europe... the conflict between different systems of value*'.³⁶ Among other things, he also said that Estonian hospitals were willing to take the treatment of seriously wounded Ukrainian freedom fighters. It is worth noting that previously Estonia had provided aid to victims of the protests on Euro-maidan. Moreover, the government increased the number of available scholarships for Ukrainians in Estonian universities. Estonia treated 15 Ukrainian militants from the ATO area later and has allocated €120 000 for humanitarian aid (generators, sleeping bags, &c.).³⁷

Estonian President Thomas Ilves has repeatedly accused the West of allowing Russia annex Crimea and unleashing war in eastern Ukraine, in particular, in an interview to *The American Interest*. According to his statements, the Kremlin has stated its aggressive intentions numerously and used weapons to promote its interests in the neighbouring countries. The EU and the US did not respond to it and allowed the Russians to behave aggressively.³⁸

Latvia

Assuming the presidency of the Council of the European Union in the first half of 2015, Latvia gained an opportunity to contribute actively to

the formation of the EU response to the aggressive behaviour of Russia in Ukraine. However, one should note that the Lisbon Treaty, having entered into force in December 2009, slightly altered the institutional construction of the Union. The Presidency in the EU Council of Foreign Affairs is carried by High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the role of the Presidency in other configurations of the Council makes it impossible to directly influence the agenda of EU's foreign policy.

Latvia's approach to the events in Ukraine must balance two opposing aspects. On one hand, Latvia is experiencing possible risks of aggression and therefore must increase defensive measures. On the other hand, it has deep cultural and economic ties with Russia. Therefore, it is the most open to cooperation with Russia among the three Baltic countries in order to promote de-escalation in Ukraine and is less supportive of isolation of Russia.

Latvia strongly supports Ukraine's sovereignty and its territorial integrity. The government condemned annexation of Crimea and considers the Russian aggression in Ukraine a threat to peace and stability in Europe. It also calls for greater NATO presence in the Baltic countries and supports sanctions against Russia. During the conflict in eastern Ukraine, Latvia provides humanitarian assistance and expert support to Ukraine (including treatment of Ukrainian wounded soldiers), provides seminars for government and civil society to combat corruption, and takes groups of children (12-17 years old) from the ATO area. Latvia insists on the need for a higher degree of protection of the Baltic States by NATO and welcomes the decision of the United States to place their forces in Latvia. Despite close economic ties, Latvia supported sanctions against Russia and 'is fighting' it in the information war.³⁹

Latvia has not fully turned away from its big neighbour nonetheless. A large Russian minority has close ties with Russia and the two countries have very significant trade relations. Almost 30% of the Latvian population speaks Russian as a first language, but many ethnic Russians cannot vote in elections and have special status of non-citizen.⁴⁰ As a result, while some political and business circles insist on a rigid position against Russia, others call to support economic and cultural ties with it. Actions of Latvia concerning Ukraine and Russia are more moderate than, for example, neighbouring Lithuania. In response to the declared willingness of Lithuania to provide Ukraine

with weapons, Prime Minister of Latvia Laimdota Straujuma stated that Latvia would support Ukraine 'differently'.⁴¹ In fact, Latvia will maintain the economic and cultural doors open for Russia if the situation in Ukraine moves toward de-escalation.

The economic and infrastructural dependence on Russia largely influences the attitude of Latvia to the events related to the crisis in Ukraine and the Russian invasion. Gazprom owns 34% of the Latvijas Gāze national gas company, and Latvia is completely dependent on natural gas supplies from Russia.⁴² The economic impact of Russia spreads beyond energy. It is one of Latvia's largest export markets. However, the government of Latvia supported the sanctions, despite the heavy losses that they can bring to the economy. Latvia has suffered greatly from the Russian embargo on imports of dairy products, meat, fruit and vegetables from the EU. Because of falling demand from Russia, the wholesale price of milk in Latvia decreased by 25% during the period from July to November 2014, while the price of butter and cheese went down at 19-20%. The market price of vegetables decreased by 30-50%.⁴³ The Government notes the significant economic losses associated with sanctions but stressed the political significance of the latter. Prime Minister L. Straujuma warned that the worst scenario for Estonia is a 10% GDP fall if Russia breaks all economic ties with Latvia. She stressed that this is unlikely to happen, but if so, preserving of political sovereignty justified the economic difficulties: *'We cannot retreat from the sanctions. [...] The independence is more important than the economic difficulties that we can overcome'*.⁴⁴

Poland, Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia are united by the perception of the Russian aggression in Ukraine as a threat to their national security, support for tough anti-Russian sanctions policy in the international arena, assisting Ukraine at the level of declarations as well as the level of specific actions. However, the degree of participation and support for Ukraine depends on their actual capabilities, domestic and foreign policy priorities, and ranges from providing weapons to Ukraine (Lithuania) to a more moderate position (neighbouring Latvia). Within the EU and NATO, all four countries play the role of 'hawks', urging the West to actively resist Russia and to help Ukraine by all available means, including military assistance. In terms of strengthening their positions on the conflict resolution, Poland and the Baltic States should seek to strengthen regional dialogue within the New Europe, for example through the Visegrad Group, the Central European Initiative, or civil

society organisations. It is extremely important to achieve common understanding of the nature and consequences of Russia's challenges for Europe and to co-operate more closely with Germany, which has taken a leading role in uniting for a common EU policy on the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Co-operation with the United States in order to coordinate their own positions and actions of the partners, and contribution to formation of a new EU policy towards Eastern Europe within discussions on the improvement of the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership are necessary as well.

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“Putinverstehers” in Central Europe

Kremlin media is actively working in Central Europe and is shaping the views of a sizeable pro-Russia constituency in those countries. Russia managed to create a large reservoir supporters and sympathisers among extreme left and extreme right parties. According to Van Herpen,⁴⁵ those “*Putinverstehers*” or “*Putin apologists*” help to the Kremlin's propaganda offensive and “*did not hesitate to condone Russia's act of aggression*”.

Hungary

The Hungarian government is much more pro-Russian than any other V4 country. There are two main aspects that could explain such Hungary's position towards Russia. First of all, there is a profound level of economic relations with Russia, namely Russian investment. In order to overcome economic problems in the country's economy and realising that the EU is not the best solution to resolve them, the government seeks to broaden its economic co-operation with non-European countries, namely Russia and China.⁴⁶

Hungary is also an opponent of sanctions against Russia largely because of its dependence on Russian natural gas (Hungary is more than 80% dependent on gas from Russia). Moreover, Russia is Hungary's biggest trade partner outside the EU.

Another factor of such an alliance with Moscow is similar ideology. According to Viktor Orban, the Hungarian Prime Minister, the model of Western democracy is not efficient anymore and Turkey, China or Russia are good examples of it. The Russian annexation of Crimea was, according to Russian officials, caused by the desire to protect the Russian-speaking people who live on the peninsula. Orban shares the same point of view and the same ideology, *expansionist nationalism*: he often speaks about Greater Hungary that would include Hungarian

minorities living in the neighbouring countries – in Romania, Ukraine, Slovakia and Serbia. Mr. Orban also calls for autonomy of the Hungarian minorities in Ukraine that reach almost 200,000 ethnic Hungarians. In the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Budapest states that Ukraine cannot be stable without giving rights and autonomy to its minorities because Kremlin accuses Kyiv of discrimination against national minorities (namely Russians).⁴⁷

Slovakia

According to Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, diplomacy and politics are the only solution for the Ukrainian crisis with neither military action nor economic sanctions. It comes from long warm relations with Russia, and the economic factors are the key here because the energy industry of Slovakia is heavily dependent on Russia. Regarding the question of sanctions on Russia, Slovakia stands against but does not go against the unity of the EU and NATO: “*In Crimea, we have witnessed a violation of international law. The current dialogue takes place in conditions of war and economic sanctions. Nobody wants that Russia suffers more*”, says Fico.⁴⁸ However, Mr Fico also said that he could not imagine any foreign soldiers being based in Slovakia.

Fico is one of the candid opponents of economic sanctions against Russia. He also rejected demands to increase military expenditure within NATO in view of Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine.⁴⁹ In spite of the anti-sanctions rhetoric, the Slovak authorities approve all restrictive measures against Russia adopted by the EU.

The Russia-Ukraine conflict caused most Central European countries to increase their military budgets. Bratislava does not intend to do this thus because of very limited resources. According to the World Bank, the Slovak Republic allocated only 1 percent of its GDP to the Defence Ministry between 2011 and 2015.⁵⁰ A lack of interest in defence will lead Slovakia to a greater dependence on Russia because Bratislava relies on aging Russian-made military equipment that will need to be replaced.

The President Andrej Kiska (in office since June 2014) has criticised the government for its uncertain position on the Ukrainian crisis. The public of Slovakia is also divided over the crisis. According to one poll, almost a half of the Slovak citizens (45%) are in favour of European integration of Ukraine. At the same time, 49% think that the EU should not impose sanctions on Russia.⁵¹ Parliamentary elections in March

2016 influenced the policy of official Bratislava towards Ukraine that is characterised by the consolidation of position of President Andrej Kiska (centre-right forces) and Prime Minister Robert Fico (ruling centre-left forces).

The migration crisis in the European Union also caused positive transformation of stereotypes about Ukraine and prompted the government to choose quite a critical position regarding the EU's migration policy: In September 2015, Mr Fico complained about the unfair, complicated procedure for obtaining Schengen visas by Ukrainians, and meanwhile Brussels required Bratislava to accept refugees from the Middle East.⁵²

Bratislava, during its presidency in the Council of the EU in the second half of 2016, sought to increase its international prestige and strengthen its influence on the development EU's common policy towards Russia's war against Ukraine. Slovak leaders count on effective co-operation with Ukraine as a non-permanent member of the Security Council, namely to co-ordinate measures to stabilise the security situation and promote democratisation in Eastern Europe and to support relevant projects in Ukraine and other participating countries in the Eastern Partnership as one of the main priorities of the future Slovak EU presidency.

Czech Republic

The position of Prague on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is still ambiguous because it is a country of multiple policies.⁵³ The Czech President's stance towards the Ukrainian crisis is controversial that could be explained by his close association with the Russian political elites in spite of strong support of Ukraine by the government. According to President Miloš Zeman, there is a civil war in Ukraine. He even questioned the presence of Russian troops in Ukraine, but later admitted that there is '*Russian aggression*' and '*the invasion of Russian troops*'.⁵⁴ President Miloš Zeman also supported the idea of *finlandisation* of Ukraine, stating that Ukraine should not join NATO and must remain neutral.⁵⁵

Czech authorities are trying primarily to defend the interests of Czech exporters, especially those linked to the Russian market and heavy engineering industries. Former Prime Minister *Bohuslav Sobotka* says the sanctions have not produced positive results so far, while their expansion severely hit the Czech economy. In his opinion, the

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Czech Republic cannot lose the Russian market, because if so, Chinese products will occupy their place and then a return to the Russian market after the end of the conflict will be impossible.⁵⁶

Many Czech officials and experts think that the biggest weakness of the 'Minsk process' is the representation of the West by the two largest trading partners of Russia – Germany and France, and two guarantors of the Budapest Memorandum⁵⁷– the UK and the US. Moreover, there are different tools used in the peace-making (and keeping) process: Russia considers the Minsk Agreements as instruments of its hard power, aggressive political and military pressure on Kyiv aiming at 'freezing' the conflicts. The EU views the agreements as solutions for the conflict in a peaceful way, by soft power instead.

As to sanctions, Prague occupies a 'betwixt and between' position. The Czech Republic stands against economic sanctions against Russia in general; however, it actively supported the first two rounds of the sanctions. Moreover, it stopped the Rosatom-led Temelín nuclear project.⁵⁸ With relation to NATO, Prague supports strengthening of the Alliance's positions in the Baltic States. Hence, the Czech Republic is much more committed to the common stance of West against Russia's military aggression than neighbouring Hungary or Slovakia.

Common and different positions of the Visegrad Four countries and the Baltic States

Visegrad and Baltic countries, despite differences in political and economic interests in relations with Ukraine and Russia, preserved unity on issues of territorial integrity and European aspirations of Ukraine, and condemned Russia's actions from 2014 to 2016. The V4 and Baltic States supported the territorial integrity of Ukraine in official statements in the context of the annexation of the Crimea and the war in Donbas during this time. They considered Russia's policy as one that violates the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, making other public statements on Russia's need to respect international law.

Notwithstanding, the achievement of consensus was difficult because of personal political sympathies of some leaders (such as President of the Czech Republic M. Zeman, and his Hungarian counterpart V. Orban), ethno-political interests in Ukraine up to the requirements of formation of national-territorial autonomy in its composition (Hungary), economic ties with Russia (Slovakia, Czech Republic, Hun-

gary). The assessment of causes of the conflict varied from aggression of Russia (Poland, the Baltic States) to 'civil war' (Czech Republic). The approaches on the need and implication of the EU sanctions against Moscow were different as well. This measure has been criticised by Hungary, which is almost totally dependent on energy supplies from Russia, and is the borrower of loans, followed by the Slovak Republic (due to the power factor and powerful Russian information influence in the political and social sphere of the country) and the Czech Republic, where needs of its economy is the main priority. Even though there is such differentiation, Central European States are objectively interested in the security of Ukraine (as first-order neighbours and economic partners) as well as having opportunities for strengthening their weight in European politics.

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In spite of existence of common approaches in policies of V4 and Baltic countries on Ukraine, there are also clear differences between them. They can be explained by the following factors: historical heritage, concern for their own security, the current political situation, economic and financial interests and transatlantic relations.

The Republic of Poland showed the most uncompromising approach to the assessment of the 2014 events, annexation of Crimea and military aggression in Donbas, defending imposition of sanctions on Russia. Extension of the Normandy format, flexible alliances in the Baltic-Black Sea region, placing NATO infrastructure in the Baltic States and Central Europe became main goals of the Polish foreign policy installed soon after the dramatic changes in the higher echelons of power in 2015 and coincide with the national interests of Ukraine. However, a complex of humanitarian issues (e.g. the problem of massacres of Poles in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia) appeared to be extremely sensitive to representatives of right-wing conservative forces that have come to power in Poland and, therefore, require much accuracy in today's Ukrainian-Polish relations.

The Baltic States that have common land border with Russia and where the Russian language minority makes a significant part of the population are well aware of the situation in Ukraine. They, as well as Poland, do not consider the conflict in eastern Ukraine as a domestic conflict, and consider the Russian factor and advocate the continuation and intensification of the sanctions against Russia. The Baltic countries have stepped up measures on strengthening their own security and defence, including placing additional NATO forces on their

territory. Lithuania is one of the biggest lobbyists of Ukraine in the European Union among them. In contrast, Estonia and especially Latvia demonstrate more reserved positions.

Hungary, in addition to latent ethnic and political animosities with Ukraine (Budapest requirements concerning expansion of autonomy for the Hungarian minority in the Transcarpathian region), has significant economic ties with Russia not only in the energy sector but also in other economic areas. The main political players in Hungary in recent years have been using anti-liberal and anti-American rhetoric, searching for their own development model, and therefore indicating respect for the political system of Putin.

The policy of the Slovak Republic on the development of relations with Ukraine, precisely on the Ukraine-Russia conflict, is rather controversial due to different foreign policy positions of Slovakia's leaders.

Like Slovakia, a proportion of Czechs have rather pro-Russian views explained by traditional Russophilia, Pan-Slavism, presence of Russian capital in the country, a large number of affiliated sites and think tanks holding economic ties with Russia. The support or neutral attitude to the Russian position on the Ukrainian question is in fact a marginal position among active public and politicians, as evidenced by demonstrations against President Miloš Zeman, who openly condemned the development of Ukraine in post-Maidan period and named the struggle in Donbas a 'civil war'.

The Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary opposed the imposition of EU sanctions on Russia in late summer – early autumn 2014, explaining their position with economic arguments. They have later repeatedly advocated reduction or complete abolition of the sanctions. Acceptance of the EU position on extension of the sanctions by the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary is caused by their dependence on Brussels and Berlin in economic and other matters. One can anticipate their future attitude: Prague, Budapest and Bratislava will follow all the consensus decisions within the EU regarding Ukraine, at least until Berlin supports the current common EU position on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

Conclusions

The countries of Central Europe officially unconditionally support the territorial integrity of Ukraine at the present stage and condemn Russia's actions in Ukraine as violation of its sovereignty and ba-

sic principles of international law. However, several constants have emerged with respect to the Ukrainian question among members of the Visegrad Group and Baltic States despite common interests in many strategic issues. Differentiation in assessing the meaning of political changes in Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in the Russian-Ukrainian border may be explained by historical heritage, homeland security issues, current political situation, economic interests, and significance of the transatlantic relations. Policies of Central European and Baltic countries on the 'Ukrainian' issue can be considered common in fundamental issues, but in practise provide short-term national interests, without taking into account the strategic interests of the region.

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Difference between the approaches of the V4 countries and the Baltic States is not conducive for unity and impugn their willingness and ability to act as an internal advocate for the EU's Eastern neighbours. It also reduces the ability of the European Union as a whole to respond effectively to the spiral of violence in Ukraine. This requires co-operation upon strengthening regional dialogue on fundamental changes in the security between the countries of the region and their partners in the EU and across the Atlantic east of their borders. Regional fora such as the Visegrad Group or the Central European Initiative, along with civil society, can promote a stronger regional consensus in response to the new challenges that have arisen between Russia and Eastern Europe. The Polish concept of new unions in Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltic States seems highly germane.



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