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POSITIONS OF THE VISEGRAD FOUR COUNTRIES AND THE BALTIC STATES ON THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN CONFLICT

ABSTRACT

The article analyses the positions of the Visegrad Group and the Baltic countries on the Russia-Ukraine conflict that erupted in 2014. The authors prove that Poland, Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia are united by perception that the Russian aggression in Ukraine is a threat to their national security, they support for tough policy of anti-Russian sanctions in the international arena, and assist Ukraine and the level of declarations and at the level of action. Nonetheless, level of their participation and support for Ukraine depends on their actual capabilities and domestic and foreign policy priorities. Reactions of other V4 countries to events in Ukraine are more restrained and vary from quiet pragmatism in Slovakia to clear pro-Russian voices in the Czech Republic and Hungary. It is unlikely, however, that their position can be a real obstacle to the implementation of the common EU action in the near future.

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

1. INTRODUCTION

Topicality of the article is caused by the fact that during the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, which broke out in 2014, the Visegrad Four countries and the Baltic States were surprisingly divided in relation to the conflict's sides. Despite the common history as Soviet satellites, and (for most of them) direct occupation of Moscow in the twentieth century, 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

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with their neighbours in the East, their reaction to the events in Ukraine was not unanimous. Poland and the Baltic States took up the most rigid and principled position on the Ukrainian crisis, annexation of Crimea to Russia and the following military campaign in Donbas. Each state has its own internal motives of such behaviour associated primarily with their recent history. In contrast, the reaction of the Southern part of Central Europe to the events in Ukraine was more restrained. It ranges from cautious condemnation of Slovakia to clear pro-Russian voices in the Czech Republic and Hungary. On 21 December 2015, the Foreign Affairs Council prolonged EU economic sanctions against Russia until 31 July 2016, whilst countries such as Hungary, Slovakia and, increasingly, the Czech Republic are now opposed to any further sanctions against Moscow. What is it that is behind their different positions?

2. ANALYSIS OF RECENT RESEARCH

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. A. Kyrydon, S. Troian, M. Baranowski, B. Cichocki analysed the position and activities of Poland towards the sides of the conflict. V. Jurkonis, M. Maigre, K. Berzina studied the activity of the Baltic States. As to the Visegrad countries, A. Kramer, A. Racz, F. Markowicz scrutinised the policy and stance of the V4 thoroughly and in general. A. Duleba, M. Gniazdowski, Ł. Kołtuniak concentrated on the positions of separate countries of the group.

Notwithstanding, as the conflict in Ukraine is still ongoing and the approaches of the Visegrad Group and Baltic states on it undergo certain modifications, the analysis remains relevant scientific task.

3. RESULTS

The debates in the EU on sanctions against Russia deepened the differences between the countries of Central Europe, and particularly the Visegrad Four (V4) countries and the Baltic States. While Warsaw, Tallinn and Vilnius are calling 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 many times their doubts about the effectiveness of sanctions, pointing to their negative effects on their own and other EU countries, and strongly oppose the military assistance to Ukraine (Tab. 1.). It is clear that the factor of their energy and financial dependence on Russia plays an important role here. However, their post-war history, dependence on Moscow via Warsaw Pact and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance should have at least contributed 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 within the EU for the eastern neighbours and weakens the EU's ability to respond effectively to the spiral of violence in Ukraine (Map 1).

Tab. 1. Positions of the Visegrad Group and the Baltic countries on the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict

	Reaction on Russian aggression	Reaction of society	Area(s) of Russian influence	Stance towards sanctions
Estonia	Negative	Entirely negative	Russian minority, Economic relations, Energy dependence	Supports enforcement of the sanctions
Latvia	Negative	Entirely negative	Russian minority, Economic relations, Energy dependence	Supports enforcement of the sanctions
Lithuania	Negative	Entirely negative	Economic relations, Energy dependence	Supports enforcement of the sanctions
Poland	Negative	Entirely negative	Economic relations, Energy dependence	Supports enforcement of the sanctions
Czech Republic	Negative	Generally negative	Deep energy and financial dependence	Government supports enforcement of the sanctions, President does not
Slovakia	Negative	Generally negative	Energy dependence, dependence on military equipment	Government against, President in favour
Hungary	Officially negative	Generally negative	Economic relations, Russian natural gas, common policy of expansionist nationalism	Official Budapest does not support neither keeping nor enforcement of the sanctions

Source: The table is elaborated by the authors of the article.

Map 1. Positions of the Visegrad Group and the Baltic countries on the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict



-  Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland – are against Russia’s aggression and stand in favor of enforcement of the sanctions
-  The Czech Republic – follows UE’s position but does not actively participate in the Russia–Ukraine conflict resolution process
-  Slovakia – supports sanctions but is not actively involved in discussion or resolution of the conflict. It would prefer to cancel the sanctions
-  Hungary is against the sanctions and stands on canceling them

The earliest and most principled positions on the “Ukrainian crisis”, the annexation of Crimea by Russia and an escalation of the conflict in eastern Ukraine were formulated by Poland, Lithuania and Estonia. The positions were formed under the influence of various factors. The first one is the arguments related to their own 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 through collective defense. Another factor that influenced the formation of the positions of Poland and the Baltic countries at the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is their strong transatlantic ties. Even the US presence in Europe is seen as guaranteeing peace, security and stability in the region. Therefore, 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. Last but not the least important factor is that Ukraine is important for Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania as a target country of the Eastern Partnership. It was defined as a foreign policy priority of each of them and they send the largest part of development aid precisely to the countries of the Eastern Partnership. We will consider the positions and activities of each country in relation to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

Poland. Poland has been responding 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 preventing further violence in Ukraine were central issues in Polish bilateral and multilateral negotiations with the Ukrainian government and its EU and NATO partners. Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski, together with his French and German counterparts, was intermediary in negotiations between the protesters and the President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich on 20 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”.

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 August 30, 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 of the eastern flank of NATO (Kyrydon & Troyan, 2015, pp. 50–51).

From then onwards, Poland has been focusing primarily on actions that could be implemented within the European and transatlantic organisations in response to the 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 suburbs of the Alliance. Poland defended the idea of increasing the presence of allied troops on the northeast side during the preparations for the NATO Summit Wales in September 2014.

Poland has allocated 100 million euro credit assistance to Ukraine and 2.5 million to the scholarship programme for students of the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, Crimea (in 2015). It was also provided a humanitarian assistance by more than \$ 1 million. The Polish government also allocated 170 000 euro for treatment and rehabilitation of the Ukrainian military (85 people) (112 ua, 2015).

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

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. The legendary leader of Solidarity Zbigniew Bujak called the passivity of the Polish authorities on Ukraine as “treason” (Rzeczpospolita, 2015).

The behaviour of the Polish Government follows a certain logic: Poland will not affect 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 newly appointed 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” (Baranowski & Cichocki, 2015, p. 36). 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” (Baranowski & Cichocki, 2015, p. 36).

This position is not surprising, taking into consideration that at the beginning of the first term, the D.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 subsequent events may indicate that this assumption was correct, including D.Tusk election president of the European Council.

Despite the importance of the official position of Warsaw, it should be noted also extremely high level of support of Ukraine by Polish public. Many Poles, journalists, politicians, diplomats, students, human rights activists, volunteers, have become direct participants of Euromaidan and events in Eastern Ukraine. According to surveys of the Fund “Transatlantic Trends”, 78% of Poles are in favour of economic assistance to Ukraine, 77% supported sanctions against Russia, and 67% supported aid to Ukraine, even if it will increase the danger of conflict with Russia (Baranowski & Cichocki, 2015, p. 35). 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 ...” (Loginov, 2015).

As for the prognosis, we need to talk about the willingness of Poland at level of official Warsaw and society, and systematically at the EU and NATO levels to continue supporting Ukraine. Poland realizes that stability and security Ukraine is a guarantee of its own stability and security. If the “Normandy format” (repeatedly publicly criticised by Polish President A. Duda as German-French tandem that does not reflect the true position of the EU and whose activities are not always in the interests of Ukraine) exhaust its potential, Warsaw must play a more active role in the new diplomatic forums aimed at resolving the conflict. In this respect, Poland should intensify its activities when it comes to offer new ideas for the long term. Seems that the format of the Weimar triangle, that once worked well in terms of promoting European integration of Poland, could be useful in the settlement of certain aspects of Russian-Ukrainian conflict. These capabilities have been demonstrated during the “*Ukrainian crisis*”, as it was discussed above. Today, there are favourable circumstances for deeper involvement of Poland to the EU’s Eastern policy formation within the mechanisms of the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership – it is the presidency of the former Polish Prime Minister D.Tusk in the European Council and his close interaction with A.Merkel (whose grandfather was Pole).

Lithuania. The active role of Lithuania during the crisis in Ukraine and in conditions of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is not accidental. Lithuania is 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 support it on a bilateral level, as evidenced by numerous visits by politicians and senior Lithuanian officials in Ukraine. It is necessary to note the unprecedented participation of civil society in Lithuania in Ukrainian events that started with local solidarity actions with the Euromaidan and later manifested in voluntary missions of doctors, charity concerts to support Ukraine &c.

A large 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 historical possibility of signing the Association Agreement with Ukraine, and in Kyiv they were urging at 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, 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 (Jurkonis, 2015, p. 31).

As presiding in the UN Security Council, Lithuania initiated an emergency meeting on the crisis in Ukraine in February 2014 and remained active in this matter not only at the UN but also in the institutions of the EU, NATO, and OSCE for further time. Lithuania unequivocally condemns Russian aggression against Ukraine, claims the responsibility for the events in Ukraine, accused of supporting terrorists, insists on the recognition of “LNR” and “DNR” as terrorist organisations. Lithuania supports anti-Russian sanctions and their expansion, and defends 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 by the severity of comments addressed to Russia.

Lithuania allocated 50 000 euro in the NATO Trust Fund for Ukraine and provided assistance to the Ukrainian army for 43 500 euro. The state provides treatment and rehabilitation of Ukrainian soldiers and civilians from the area ATO monthly; provides helmets, body armour, bulletproof panels, dry rations and medical supplies for the Ukrainian military. Lithuanian humanitarian assistance to Ukraine exceeded 250 000 euro (112 ua, 2015).

Lithuania even donated items armament to Ukraine. Together with Poland, Lithuania participates in creation of 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 (112 ua, 2015).

There are many reasons that explain this position of Lithuania. Despite the fact that it is part of the Euro-Atlantic community as the member of NATO and EU, it has repeatedly felt the pressure from Russia. It varied in the range 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 to 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 the 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, Foreign Minister Urmas Paet stated that the Russia’s actions and threats against Ukraine are violating 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 (Maigre, 2015, p. 16).

Estonia supports sanctions against Russia and provides assistance package to Ukraine in various European and Euro-Atlantic fora. In late August 2014, when a significant number of Russian combat troops entered the eastern Ukraine, TH Ilves insisted that it should finally dispel any doubts as to Russia’s participation in the conflict (Maigre, 2015, p. 16). In September 2014, he visited Kyiv to express support for the country towards political and economic reforms. 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” (Maigre, 2015, p. 17). 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 even before Estonia has provided aid to victims because of protests on Euromaidan. Moreover, the government increased the number of available scholarships for Ukrainians in Estonian universities. Estonia took to treat 15 Ukrainian militaries from the ATO area later and has allocated 120 000 euro for humanitarian aid (generators, sleeping bags, &c.) (112 ua, 2015).

Latvia. Assuming the presidency of the Council of the European Union in the first half of 2015, a small Baltic state 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 entering 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 foreign policy.

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

Latvia strongly supports Ukraine's sovereignty and its territorial integrity. The government condemned the annexation of Crimea considers Russian aggression in Ukraine as 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, 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 in placing their forces in Latvia. Despite close economic ties, Latvia supported sanctions against Russia and "is fighting" it in the information war (Bērziņa, 2015, p. 25–26).

Latvia has not fully turned out 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 Latvian population speaks Russian as a first language, but many ethnic Russians cannot vote in elections and have special status of non-citizen (Bērziņa, 2015, p. 26). 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" (Latvian Public Broadcasting, 2014). In fact, Latvia has maintained the economic and cultural door open for Russia if the situation in Ukraine will move 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 national gas company "Latvijas Gāze" and Latvia is completely dependent on natural gas supplies from Russia (Bērziņa, 2015, p. 27). 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, the price of butter and cheese went down at 19–20%. The market price of vegetables decreased by 30–50% (Finance.net, 2014). 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” (Bērziņa, 2015, p. 27).

Thence, 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 by Lithuania to more moderate position of 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 Visegrad Group, the Central European Initiative, civil society organisations. It is highly important to achieve common understanding of the nature and consequences of Russia's challenges for Europe; to co-operate more closely with Germany, that has taken a leading role in uniting for a common EU policy on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict; to co-operate with the United States in order to co-ordinate their own positions and actions of the partners; to contribute to formation of a new EU policy towards Eastern Europe within discussions on the improvement of the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership.

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. Despite the fact that mostly Germans and French have confidence to the Russian leader Vladimir Putin, calling “Putinverstehers” or “Putin-understanders”, Putin has also a reasonable number of his supporters in Central Europe.

Hungary. The Hungarian government is much more pro-Russian than any other Central European country. There are two main aspects that could explain such Hungary's position towards Russia. First of all, it is 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 (Markowic, 2014).

Hungary is also against 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 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 example of it. The Russian annexation of Crimea was, according to Russian officials, caused by the desire to protect the Russia-speaking people who live on the peninsula. V.Orban share the same point of view and the same ideology, *expansionist nationalism*: he often speaks about greater Hungary that would include Hungarian minority living in the neighbourhood countries – in Romania, Ukraine, Slovakia and Serbia. Mr Orban also calls for the 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 in discrimination against national minorities (namely Russians) (Kramer, 2014, p. 51).

Slovakia. According to Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, diplomacy and politics are the only solution for the Ukrainian crisis without any military action nor economic sanctions. It comes from long warm relation with Russia and the economic factors are a key here because energy industry of Slovakia is heavily dependent on Russia. In 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 (Pravda, 2015). However, Mr Fico also said that he cannot imagine any foreign soldiers being based in Slovakia.

Fico is one of the candid opponents of economic sanction against Russia. He also rejected demands to increase defense spending within NATO in view of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine (Lopatka & Santa, 2014). 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 Eastern 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 to the Defense Ministry only 1 percent of its GDP in the period 2011–2015 (The World Bank, 2016). A lack of interest in defense 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 been criticising 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 (Duleba, 2015, p. 43).

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

Migration crisis in the European Union also caused positive transformation of stereotypes about Ukraine and prompted the government to choose quite critical position regarding the EU's migration policy: In September 2015, Mr Fico stated about unfair situation when

the procedure for obtaining Schengen visas by Ukrainians is very complicated, meanwhile, Brussels requires Bratislava to accept refugees from the Middle East (Borys Intel, 2015).

Bratislava now is actively preparing for the upcoming European Union presidency in the second half of 2016, with the intention to increase its international prestige and strengthen its influence on the development EU's common policy towards Russia's war against Ukraine. Slovak leadership counts on effective cooperation with Ukraine as a non-permanent member of the Security Council, above all in the plane coordinate measures to stabilize the security situation and promote democratization in Eastern Europe and to promote relevant projects in our country and other countries participating in EU programs "Eastern Partnership" as one of the main priorities of the future Slovak EU presidency.

Czech Republic. The position of the official Prague on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is still ambiguous because it is the country of multiple policies (Markowic, 2014). 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 Zeman, there is a civil war in Ukraine. He even questioned the presence of Russian troops in Ukraine, but later admitted that there is a "Russian aggression" and "the invasion of Russian troops" (Gniazdowski, Groszkowski & Sadecki, 2014). President Milosh Zeman also supported the idea of *finlandisation* of Ukraine stating that Ukraine should not join NATO and has to stay neutral (Radiosvoboda.ua., 2014).

The Czech authorities are trying first of all to defend the interests of Czech exporters, especially linked to the Russian market and heavy engineering industries. Prime Minister Sobotka says that the sanctions have not produced positive results so far, while their expansion severely hit the Czech economy. In his opinion, the Czech Republic cannot lose the Russian market, because if so, Chinese products will occupy their place and then return to the Russian market after the end of the conflict will be impossible.

Many Czech officials and experts think that the biggest weakness of "Minsk process" is a representation of the West by the two largest trading partners of Russia – Germany and France, and there is no play for the guarantees of the Budapest Memorandum – UK and US. Moreover, there are different tools used in 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 position betwixt and between. 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 Temel'n nuclear project (Racz, 2014, p. 7). In 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.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Certain position of some Central European countries on Russian-Ukrainian conflict is surprising in spite of the common history as Soviet satellites, and direct occupation of Moscow in the twentieth century (for most of them). The region has surprisingly divided in relation to

the conflict despite the geographical proximity to the conflict zone, deep economic, historical and cultural relations with their eastern neighbours, and good understanding of contemporary Russia. Unlike Poland and the Baltic States, that stand firmly against Russia's aggression in Ukraine and are in favour of sanctions, the response of the Central European countries is more restrained. It ranged from quiet pragmatism in Slovakia and clear pro-Russian vote in Hungary and the Czech Republic.

The official representatives of those countries are mostly silent about the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. As to sanctions against Russia, this issue has even deepened the differences between the countries of Central Europe. While Warsaw, Tallinn and Vilnius are calling to deepen restrictive measures against the Russian Federation, to exclude it from the Swift system and even expressed willingness to supply weapons to Ukraine, Budapest, Prague and Bratislava once openly declared their doubts about the effectiveness of sanctions, pointing to their negative effects themselves and other EU countries, and strongly oppose the supply arms to Ukraine.

Such positions are explained by deep energy and financial dependence on Russia. Their post-war history and dependence on Moscow thus should at least contribute to a greater understanding of the potential threats from the Kremlin. The diversity of views and reactions from Central Europe cause doubt on its ability to act as an internal advocate for the EU's eastern neighbourhood and weakens the ability of the EU as a whole to respond effectively to the spiral of violence in Ukraine.

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