



The Czech-Polish positions on the Eastern Partnership: In search of new synergies

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Summary

- Despite certain bilateral problems between Czechia and Poland at the moment, there is a strong currently untapped potential for cooperation between both countries, which is most obvious in the foreign and security aspects of Eastern policy.

- The approach of both partners is largely complementary across the region and future synergies might be easily sought should new political will be found and the bilateral disputes between Czechia and Poland that currently overshadow the opportunities be unblocked.

- Czechia plays a relevant role in Moldova and Georgia, and Poland, whilst also active in these countries, is a key player in Ukraine and Belarus (society), which might stimulate cooperation and promote complementarity and additional coordination in the Eastern policies of both countries. The future of Ukraine because of its political, military, economic and demographic predominance in the Eastern Neighborhood possesses a key importance for Poland, Czechia and the EU.

- The new Czech government is going to look for allies and in the highly problematic situation with Russia, Poland is the most obvious candidate for pursuing common interests and facing shared challenges. Poland, on its own, is going to face difficulties in pursuing its own agenda due to the OSCE chairmanship in 2022, while Czechia is preparing for the EU Council presidency in the second half of 2022, which is why Czechia is going to be a handy partner too.

- Both countries have a very tense relationship with Russia and to some degree also view the increasingly significant role of Turkey and China with growing attention and sometimes with concern, even if it is the Russian activities in CEE which stir most worries in the region.



Recommendations

A more efficient and comprehensive Polish-Czech cooperation, particularly in Eastern policy, requires the preparation of a comprehensive strategic action plan by institutions of both countries, which should foresee the following:

- The settling down of the Turów coal mine affair, for which a satisfactory and mutually agreed solution must be found as swiftly as possible to unblock the potential for Polish-Czech cooperation in the Eastern Partnership.
- Poland is going to head the OSCE from 1 January 2022 and focus especially on the Eastern Partnership. Warsaw is going to look for allies and trusted parties to promote its own agenda. Therefore, there is a good opportunity for cooperation with a like-minded partner in Czechia.
- Restoration of the 2+2 format of cooperation between the ministries of foreign affairs and defence, with a particular focus on Eastern policy.
- Since Czechia's engagement in Ukraine is decisively smaller than that of the Polish, economic cooperation should be increased, supported by state loans, involving Ukrainian partners (joint-ventures, triangles) and especially the energy sector. Both partners should be looking for common opportunities and joint projects in the country and energy and the green agenda are going to provide a good opportunity for that.
- Poland, Czechia, and Ukraine should start organizing regular military drills, bolster the security and defence pillar of cooperation and launch common defence industrial projects.
- A comprehensive plan of support for the Belarusian opposition, diaspora, and civil society should be promoted and facilitated by the establishment of a new special foundation (symbolically called The Charter) for Polish-Czech-Belarusian Solidarity to which other interested parties could join.
- Czechia should learn from Poland (and Lithuania) when it comes to the scale of providing and facilitating help to the repressed citizens of Eastern Partnership countries, particularly from Belarus and Azerbaijan, and it should also adopt the practice of humanitarian visas, which allows for easier relocation for a longer period of time.
- Since Czechia is a key investor in Georgia (particularly the energy sector) and Poland greatly underperforms, the Polish energy companies together with Czech partners should launch common investment projects in the green economy and sustainability sectors that will also benefit from the future EU investment plan. These interconnecting projects make sense especially on the regional level (Caucasus, Turkey).



- The Polish and Czech cooperation with Moldova should be treated as a laboratory of common engagement in the region (a pilot project) because:
- The new political reality in Moldova represents a huge window of opportunity for the EU and its members. The country constitutes the easiest case to achieve the most advanced integration of any EaP country with the EU and to start to talk seriously about its long-term EU membership;
 - The engagement of Poland and Czechia in Moldova is similar. There is huge room for improvement and untapped potential for both countries. They should focus on reforms which will facilitate the integration of the country with the EU. The Polish-Czech cooperation should involve Romania to the furthest possible extent;
 - Moldova is currently under pressure from Russia's regime and energy providers (Gazprom) that try to abuse their monopolistic position on the energy market. Both Poland and Czechia should help with energy diversification and assist Moldova to finalise its obligations under the Third Energy Package and the Energy Community regulations that would promote closer integration within the Single Market.
- Both parties should invest in common research projects regarding the Polish and Czech cultural and historical ties with the region of Eastern Europe. This kind of awareness should be especially enhanced in Czechia.
- Poland and Czechia should, as a top priority, lead coalitions of the willing in backing concrete projects which address Eastern Europe and which involve those EU and NATO member states which are most influential in the region. Countries, such as Romania, the Baltic States, Germany, Sweden, the US, Canada and the UK should be the priority partners within the regional cooperation.
- Czechia under its EU presidency as well as Poland with its OSCE chairmanship should mediate between the Hungarian and Ukrainian governments and help to create some elementary trust between both parties, which has, once again, been undermined over the last year and as a result of Ukraine's local elections.
- Czechia should become an observer at the Lublin Triangle of Poland and Lithuania with Ukraine in order to increase its profile and find new common ground within the regional cooperation in Eastern Europe.
- In the period ahead, it will be crucial to put the Eastern Partnership back on the EU agenda and to use the opportunity of the forthcoming December summit to prepare and agree on a sufficiently ambitious agenda based on the common fundamental values and principles for the future of this policy after 2021, which should go beyond the existing Joint Staff Working Document, including a serious discussion within the EU on the criteria which Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine should fulfill in order to receive the status of potential candidates.



- In the period ahead, it will be of crucial importance to convert the newly created list of priorities, modelled on the older 20 Deliverables for 2020, into practice with concrete tasks for European institutions and members. It is in this respect that Czech and Polish diplomacy should cooperate and be among the leading partners, taking on concrete commitments based on long-term priorities in the Eastern Neighbourhood.

- Taking into consideration the increasing role of civil society and local governments as well as the serious economic and social challenges faced by the Association Trio (Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine), Poland and Czechia should support these countries by a marked increase of their ODA. Czechia should also invest more in its programme of transformational cooperation (TRANS), which benefits the countries of the Eastern Partnership and Western Balkans to a high degree.



1. Introduction and main thesis

The Eastern Partnership (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine) is currently going through a period of turbulent challenges to which the West (the EU, NATO) has not yet found a political will to find an adequate response, including to the recent Belarusian official suspension of participation in the Eastern Partnership projects and activities.¹

The most prominent trends in the region are the following:

- A rapidly deepening diversification of regional attitudes towards the West and political models (transitional electoral democracy vs. consolidated authoritarian regime),²
- The Increasing role of societal polarisation and domestic political turbulences,
- An increasing instability provoked by Russia's aggressive security policy and its support for anti-democratic and anti-Western political forces,
- A rising prominence and engagement of China and Turkey,

Due to their greater ambition regarding the EU's engagement in the region and to some degree also a level of frustration, some member states of the EU, including Poland, Czechia, Lithuania, Romania and Sweden, decided to voluntarily step up their efforts to work more closely with their neighbours in the east, including in the form of regional and ad hoc formats of cooperation. The V₄+, the Lublin Triangle, the Bucharest Nine and the Central Five are the most prominent among them.

However, so far, efforts towards a more ambitious European approach have been too scattered and fragmented to achieve the necessary progress and respond to the complex challenges of making the EU's Eastern neighbourhood more stable, secure, and prosperous. Thus, there is a profound need for more synergies, and not merely some elementary coordination among the interested parties from the like-minded group of primarily CEE countries. Given this, an intensification of the current bilateral cooperation between Czechia and Poland, two key Central European countries regarding Eastern Europe, is particularly necessary.

The mutual cooperation should be based on issues of common interest and a shared perception of the challenges, including primarily that from Russia. This is a case of historical memory as well as the situation in the wider Eastern neighbourhood, for which Poland and Czechia largely share a common vision based around the idea of closer Euro-Atlantic integration of the region into the Western rules-based order. For cooperation to be successful, however, finding the solution to bilateral problems and rapprochement between both countries should be treated by Czech and Polish governments as a key priority.

The paper is first going to dive into developments in the region of Eastern Europe and the role played by the EU, and particularly that of Czechia and Poland, and is then followed by an in-depth look at the roles of third parties, including Russia, China and Turkey and the reactions of both Poland and Czechia to them. The fifth section is dedicated to suggesting opportunities and future synergies in the Czech-

¹ On 28 June 2021, the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that they are withdrawing from the Eastern Partnership, Alexandra Brzozowski, "EU reproves Belarus' walkout from the Eastern Partnership", Euractiv, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/eu-reproves-belarus-walkout-from-the-eastern-partnership/> This, however, does not mean that the Belarusian citizens would not benefit from the Partnership any more: Members of the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, "EaP CSF Steering Committee statement on the decision made by Belarusian authorities to suspend Belarus' participation in the Eastern Partnership and the Readmission agreement", Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, <https://eap-csf.eu/project/sc-statement-on-the-suspension-of-belarus-participation-in-the-eap/>.

² Freedom House, "Nations in Transit", <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit>.



Polish eastern policies. The final part of conclusions then summarises the commonalities and space for more efficient cooperation and synergies.

2. Developments in the Eastern Partnership

Over the last 30 years, the societies of Eastern European partners have gone through a process of complex changes and transformation resulting in much closer and more open relations with the EU and in being exposed to the influences of Western liberal democracy and the free market economy. This has been the main goal of the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP), which has made most progress in the case of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine and has largely failed with regard to Azerbaijan and Belarus.

Three out of six EaP countries (Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine) now have visa-free regimes with the EU, which allows for more frequent visits and deeper and more efficient people-to-people ties, including labour migration. Other countries, including Azerbaijan and Armenia, have at least visa-facilitation agreements to have better access to the EU. Belarus has been deprived of this right by the Lukashenko regime.

The EaP countries are now much better integrated with the EU's Single Market, three of the six countries having Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs) with the EU. The block is the most significant trading partner and investor for four out of the six countries, leaving Belarus and Armenia where it is second on the list. This is to some degree also true for energy, in which particularly Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia have invested and promoted closer cooperation under the Energy Community treaty. As a consequence of this integration with the EU, according to Freedom House, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have become more democratic than 30 years ago and today are partly free countries which are or have been in recent years on the verge of being elevated to the category of free countries.³

However, the Eastern Partnership today is facing a number of challenges in staying on a sensible and sufficiently ambitious path towards bringing the countries of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus closer to Europe and helping them to strengthen their sovereignty and territorial integrity, which has long been challenged by the Russian Federation. The region remains a point of contest between the EU and Russia and is struggling with many serious social, economic and political problems. For instance, Azerbaijan and Belarus have experienced a dramatic authoritarian slide in recent years. Excluding Georgia, corruption is rampant in the region. It is clear that the domestic crises in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus as well as Russia's military aggression against Ukraine and Georgia and its pressure against other countries in the region will not just go away. That should, however, not distract the EU from enhancing their cooperation with the willing in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus.

The EU's Eastern neighbourhood has recently been shaken by a number of developments, and has been to a large degree overwhelmed by problems and conflicts, including the newly restored war between Armenia and Azerbaijan and an unprecedented level of repression and international isolation of Belarus, which suspended its membership in the EaP in June 2021 as well as increasingly aggressive Russia putting more and more pressure on its neighbours. As a consequence, the Associated Trio of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova gained additional prominence after finally being formalised in May 2021 by countries with a clear ambition to promote their closer integration with the EU, and in the case of Georgia and Ukraine also NATO.

It is worth underlining that Ukraine predominates clearly in Eastern Europe. Its population (more than 40 million inhabitants) accounts for almost 60% of the Eastern Partnership inhabitants, while Ukraine's GDP measured in purchase power parity (PPP) - almost 580 billion USD - constitutes 55% of the Eastern

³ Freedom House, "Freedom in the World", <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world>.



European economies. Moreover, Ukraine represents the most populous country with the largest economy (GDP PPP) located between the EU, Russia, China, and the Middle East.⁴

3. The EU's position in Eastern Europe

On December 15 and 16, 2021, the sixth EU summit of the Eastern Partnership is going to be held. The previous EU summit at the level of European leaders took place four years ago. This situation shows that the Eastern Partnership has lost its importance within the EU in recent years. Previously, summits used to be held every two years. Evidence of the lack of sufficient interest in the region among EU members is the fact that, apart from the summit in Brussels (2017), all of them were held in Central and Eastern European countries (Warsaw, Prague, Vilnius, Riga).

Moreover, the EU has not yet found the right tools and political will to respond to the new reality of Eastern Europe, where Russia has continuously played a destructive role and other players, including Turkey and China, have also entered decisively into the security, social and economic spheres due to the reluctance of the Western community to offer a credible long term prospect of Euro-Atlantic membership in both the EU and NATO.

The economic aspects of cooperation and investment in the post-covid 19 recovery have dominated over the issue of common European fundamental values or the security dimension of European interaction with the Eastern Partnership. In addition, the EU has largely avoided a more supportive approach towards the Euro-Atlantic integration of individual EaP countries.

Nevertheless, certain individual EU members, including Poland and Czechia have increased their engagement in the region, but on the other hand, a number of other EU members, including from western and southern Europe have paid little attention to the region and continued to focus on other regions of their own interest, particularly the southern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy.

The Polish perspective

After Romania, Poland has the longest common border among EU member states with the Eastern European states. This region has become mainly a security issue for Poland in recent years. The situation has been provoked by an aggressive and neo-imperial Russian policy and its rising control of certain parts of the region since 2008. Today the deepening Russian control of Belarus constitutes a particularly huge challenge to Poland's security originating from Eastern Europe. The migrant crisis on the EU border with Belarus, including the Polish-Belarusian one, represents a vivid expression of the integration of Belarus with Russia and the threats that Poland faces.

Poland's strong interest in Eastern Europe does not stem only from these very serious security challenges, but also is related to the social and economic ties between Poland and the region, especially Ukraine and Belarus (see below). These countries also share with Poland a common, though sometimes difficult history.

Poland was the co-author of the initiative of the Eastern Partnership. Warsaw remains its main advocate and the driving force. According to Poland, the initiative was supposed to serve as a first step on the long path to the accession of the best-prepared Eastern European countries to the EU. Warsaw believes that the EaP

⁴ International Monetary Fund, "World Economic Outlook Database", <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2021/October>; The key importance of Ukraine becomes even more obvious if the attitude of other countries from the region to the EU is taken into consideration. Belarus and Azerbaijan, the two biggest countries after Ukraine in the region (around 10 million inhabitants each and GDP PPP above 190 billion USD and 150 billion USD, respectively) are not interested in any substantial cooperation with the EU, Ibid.



has made huge progress in the case of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, which have decoupled from the rest of the EaP countries. However, the initiative is reaching its limits and its further substantive progress, in Poland's opinion, requires a qualitative upgrade of its agenda, including a clearer long term enlargement perspective.

Poland's coalition capacity building within the EU and NATO regarding Eastern Europe has decreased substantially due to a considerable deterioration in its relations with the EU institutions and key partners (US, Germany) stemming from Polish internal politics.⁵ There is also a clear contradiction between the internal agenda of Poland's government and the EU's promotion of liberal democracy and the rule of law in the Eastern Partnership.

Among EU member states, next to Germany, it is Poland that has the largest stakes in Ukraine and Belarus, including when it comes to the Belarusian diaspora and opposition. Unfortunately, German-Polish relations are in crisis due to Germany's support for Nord Stream 2, but also because of problems with the rule of law in Poland, which is why both countries coordinate only to a limited extent their policies towards the East.

Poland enjoys significant influence in the Eastern Partnership particularly because of its developed economic, social, political and security relations with Ukraine, the most relevant country in the region, which have intensified strongly in recent years. Indeed, Ukraine because of its location, the size of its economy, military potential and population occupies a central place not only in the Eastern Partnership but also in Polish eastern policy. Polish-Ukrainian bilateral political relations are relatively good and on top of that the economic and social ties between them have flourished greatly since 2014, when Poland gained the status of one of the most important economic and social partners of Ukraine.

In comparison to Belarus and Ukraine, Poland's relations with other countries of the Eastern Partnership are decidedly weaker and there is substantial room for improvement.

The Czech perspective

The Czech position on the Eastern Partnership has been traditionally strongly normative and focused on the Euro-Atlantic orientation of the Eastern European countries, welcoming their pro-Western course. Not having a common border with Eastern European countries gives Czechia a good and conflict-free starting position in relations with the EaP countries, which allows for open and frank diplomacy without particular interests related to any of the six countries with the possible exception of Ukraine and its rather significant emigration to the Czech Republic. That is why Czechia has been a staunch supporter of the Eastern Partnership, which it launched during its EU presidency in 2009 in Prague.

Over the past years, the Czech position towards Eastern Europe has been fairly consistent, sticking to the group of like-minded states supporting the EU's eastern policy. The Czech Republic has been actively involved in resolving the crisis in Belarus and reacted quite sharply to domestic events in the Russian Federation and, through European structures, in Kyrgyzstan too. In the case of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Czech diplomacy called for an end to the violence and offered to mediate negotiations between the two sides, but otherwise stuck to the EU position.

In addition, the Czech government has, together with Poland, joined a group of states calling for the distribution of covid-19 vaccines and personal protective equipment (PPE) to Eastern Partnership countries, which have been left behind in this regard not only compared to EU countries, but also to the Western Balkans. The supply of vaccines from the multilateral COVAX program has proved sufficient

⁵ Several resolutions of the European Parliament accepted by decisive majorities and verdicts of the European court stating that Poland was dismantling the rule of law. In fact, it undermines Polish credibility in international relations, including Eastern Europe.



whilst Europe's reputation compared to other players in the region has been undermined. Individual EU states started compensating for this situation by helping bilaterally, mostly to their closest neighbours. This was evident, for example, in Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia. The Czech Republic decided to help mainly through the provision of PPE and other technical and financial assistance, but did not offer its own vaccines to the Eastern Partnership countries.

The Czech Republic has also been continuing preparations for its forthcoming EU Council presidency in the second half of 2022, which could be a good opportunity to move some elements of policy in the Eastern Partnership agenda onto a new level. At the centre of the Czech approach should be, in particular, issues related to the resilience of the EaP countries, their economic recovery after the pandemic, but also, for example, green transformation and ecology as well as cooperation in the field of people-to-people ties, including education.

At the V₄ level, Czechia and Poland have jointly endorsed a number of ideas about strengthening security cooperation with the Associated Trio, and this appeared in the V₄ joint declaration on the future of the Eastern Partnership at the end of April this year. Additionally, Visegrad also signed up to the Partnership's core set of values and called for solidarity with the Eastern Partnership countries in regard to Russian aggression and the ongoing problems associated with the covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent recovery (V₄East Solidarity Program). But at the same time, differences between the individual V₄ countries – particularly Hungary – persist, especially in the case of the Hungarian approach towards Ukraine and Russia which has been undermining the group's coherence.

4. Russia, China and Turkey in Eastern Europe

Moscow perceives Eastern Europe as its own backyard and exclusive sphere of influence and plays a zero-sum game with the West. Russia has become decisively more aggressive in Eastern Europe over recent years, (e.g. aggression against Georgia in 2008, war against Ukraine since 2014, more robust “Zapad 2021” drills, mass concentrations of Russian troops at the Ukrainian border in 2021, etc.) trying to expand its territorial and political control over the region, including in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Russian bases and a larger territory under its occupation after the war), the annexation of Crimea, separatist people's republics in Donbas, the ongoing integration of Belarus with Russia and increasing Russian control over Armenia since the 2020 Karabakh War. However, Russia's economic, social, political, and cultural influence has in the past decades decreased dramatically in most of the region (particularly in Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and Azerbaijan).

As a consequence, Russian assets in the region have become even more based on hard power, including energy, and its readiness to use military force and blackmail Eastern European countries in order to take them hostages is on the rise. This corresponds to the main Russian goal, which is to regain and maintain its own sphere of influence, from which it wants to push out the Western alliances and prevent any further integration, especially of Ukraine, with the West.⁶

China and Turkey are the two key countries which have benefitted from Russian weakness and increased their leverage in the region in recent years. Ankara, focused especially on the Black Sea, gained status as the most important economic partner of Georgia and Azerbaijan (foreign trade, FDI, construction contracts, tourism, energy), decisively surpassing Russia. Turkey also established close cultural (particularly with Baku), social and military ties. Turkey's support contributed considerably in 2020 to Azerbaijan's victory in the Karabakh war. Moreover, Turkey

⁶ Gustav Gressel, “Russia's military movements: What they could mean for Ukraine, Europe, and NATO”, ECFR, <https://ecfr.eu/article/russias-military-movements-what-they-could-mean-for-ukraine-europe-and-nato/>.



also expanded multidimensional and comprehensive cooperation with Moldova and Ukraine in the same sectors as it did with Azerbaijan and Georgia, though to a lesser degree. Nevertheless, Turkey became one of the key economic partners of Kyiv and Chisinau. Turkish-Ukrainian cooperation in the security sphere has gained a new dimension in recent years, also thanks to a new format of bilateral foreign and security cooperation, Quatringa, which may to some degree also compensate for Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Turkey, as an autonomous regional power, pursues its own agenda in Eastern Europe. On the one hand, Turkey cooperates with the West though less often with Russia, but on the other, it competes with them, but still more often with Russia. Turkey's economy copes with various serious challenges which if aggravated, may affect the region, destabilize certain countries or at least have a negative impact on the economic performance of others. But the cooperation between Turkey and the EU in Eastern Europe may improve in the case of its democratization, which cannot be excluded in the upcoming years.

China, on its own, is rapidly gaining the position of an important economic partner of the Eastern European countries, particularly regarding trade, loans, and infrastructure. China's share in the foreign trade of economies of the region has increased in recent years and today oscillates between 7% and 15%. For instance, China became the most important trade partner of Ukraine (15%) and entrenched itself as a really significant partner for Armenia (almost 15%) and Georgia (12%), with which it also has a free trade agreement.⁷ This trend is most probably going to continue due to the better performance of the Chinese economy than the EU or Russian economies.

The further rise of Chinese economic involvement in the region should be expected due to the positive dynamics of China's economy, its global clout and Eurasian ambitions (e.g. the Belt and Road Initiative). On the other hand, China's asymmetric relations with Russia are deepening. The bilateral cooperation is more favourable for China. Today, the Chinese share in Russian trade is approaching 20%. Meanwhile, the entire EU (including the Netherlands – a global energy stock market) oscillates around 35%.⁸ On the other hand, Beijing does not want to undermine Russian interests in the region which is not a top priority for China and its foreign and security policy.

Therefore, China's role in the region may be rather negative from the point of view of the interests of the EU, Poland and Czechia. In general, Beijing supports authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe (e.g. the Belarusian dictator Lukashenko) and in the case of Russian-US rivalry, it always sides with Moscow. As a consequence, it can be assumed that Russia may take a more assertive posture in the region because it can count on (so far) a weak response from the Western community as well as relatively strong backing from China and a free hand for its operations in the East.

The Polish perspective

Polish-Russian relations are traditionally very tense due, to a very large degree, to the nature of Russian foreign policy and the long history of bilateral conflicts, and therefore their state does not depend on the political force in power in Poland. Rapprochement is highly unlikely without a change of regime in Russia. Poland perceives Russia as the most serious threat to its security. The threat perception has

⁷ Source: Statistical offices of EaP countries.

⁸ Rosstat, "O vnesnej trgovle v janvare-iluje 2021 goda"
<https://rosstat.gov.ru/storage/mediabank/177-29-09-2021.html>.



increased radically since 2014, therefore Warsaw has been increasing its military spending, which should reach 2,5 % of GDP by 2030.⁹

Currently, Poland's security position is deteriorating considerably due to the ongoing integration of Belarus with Russia in the military sphere. The result of this is that besides Kaliningrad Oblast (210 km) in the North, Poland will border Russian military space along the frontier with Belarus (almost 420 km) in the East which is just 170 km from Warsaw. Russia is also backing the current Belarusian provocations on the Polish-Belarusian border and largely benefits from their outcome both in terms of having Belarus as the European and world pariah (distraction policy) and in terms of putting pressure on Poland, the Baltic states and the rest of the European community, which is highly critical of Vladimir Putin and his regime in Russia. Poland also perceives Nord Stream 2 and more generally, German-Russian energy cooperation, as a serious threat to its own security as well as to Eastern Europe. On the other hand, Warsaw does not criticize Hungarian-Russian energy cooperation due to political considerations and the need for allies in EU politics.

An awareness of Turkey's rising importance in the region is increasing in Poland but is still insufficient. There is huge room for improvement, but Poland because of its location will always conduct more Eastern European-oriented foreign policy (covering Belarus) than focus on the Black Sea as with Turkey. Nevertheless, Poland has increased cooperation with Turkey since 2014 which also concerns the Black Sea and involves Romania (the Triangle), but there is no Turkish-Ukrainian-Polish or even plus Romanian format. Polish Eastern policy sometimes does not overlap with Turkey's position. For instance, Ankara recognized Lukashenko's "victory" in the presidential elections which should be explained by the authoritarian character of the Turkish political system.

China is a global rival of the US. If Poland is forced to choose between them it will side with Washington. China's firm support of Lukashenko and its close cooperation with Moscow make Poland feel uneasy but Warsaw avoids criticizing Beijing openly because it doesn't want to antagonize it.

The Czech perspective

Czech-Russian relations reached their lowest point since 1993 when the Russian involvement in the Vrbětice affair was revealed in April 2021 and the Kremlin labelled Czechia an "unfriendly" nation, together with the United States as the only two countries in the world. However, it should be mentioned that the bilateral relationship had been spoiled for several years already.

The crisis in bilateral relations has also been visible on the international stage, including in Eastern Europe, where Czech diplomacy has been consistently involved in promoting a Euro-Atlantic orientation as well as domestic reform agenda, particularly in the Trio countries, in which it has invested through a number of instruments and tools. These include the Transitions Promotion programme, development aid programme,¹⁰ a network of strong diplomatic presence and an active approach in the agenda of economy and investment, security and good governance.

As part of a like-minded group of EU member states, Czechia has been actively promoting a more ambitious European response towards hybrid threats and other security challenges, coming primarily from Russia. This agenda is going to be

⁹ Defence24.com, "Poland About to Increase Its Defence Expenditure up to the Level of 2.5% of GDP. A New Bill Introduced", <https://www.defence24.com/poland-about-to-increase-its-defence-expenditure-up-to-the-level-of-25-of-gdp-a-new-bill-introduced>.

¹⁰ Between 2014-20, Czechia spent almost 25 million USD on development aid only in Ukraine, BusinessInfo.cz, "Ukrajina", <https://www.businessinfo.cz/navody/ukrajina-souhrnna-teritorialni-informace/2/>.



the central focus of the future Czech policy on the Eastern Partnership during the upcoming Czech EU presidency in the second half of 2022.

More confrontation, including in Eastern Europe, may be expected with the next Czech government led by the next PM Petr Fiala who has proclaimed Russia a security threat and an undemocratic country which challenges Czech national security and domestic affairs. The new government has also subscribed to banning cooperation with Russia in large-scale infrastructure projects, such as the Dukovany-II nuclear power station. The five governing parties have also agreed on the revision of bilateral ties and stronger cooperation with the Eastern Partnership and Western Balkans countries.

The Czech perspective on the engagement of other third parties in Eastern Europe is skeptical and full of concern particularly when discussing the role of China, which has been on the rise in Belarus, Ukraine and also Georgia.

Czechia has traditionally had a rather warm relationship with Turkey which has gained more visibility in the South Caucasus as well as in Ukraine and Moldova over the past years, and helped to counterbalance Russian influence, which may be assessed positively. At the same time, Czechia is concerned about domestic developments in Turkey, even if on the governmental level it focuses on a positive agenda of economic cooperation or security partnership, which prevails over open criticism.

Regarding China, Czechia has a deeply troubled relationship affected by last year's visit by the head of the Czech Senate Miloš Vystrčil to Taiwan, which basically froze bilateral ties. By contrast, relations with Taiwan have developed rapidly and more opening can be expected with the future Czech government led by Petr Fiala. Currently, Czechia, together with Slovakia and Lithuania, is one of the most prominent partners and gateways of Taiwan in the EU, which was confirmed by the recent visit of Taiwanese ministers to the Czech Republic, which to some extent counterbalances the poor state of Czech-PRC relations' This is then reflected also in the Czech position on Chinese relations with Eastern European countries against which Czechia has been warning, and cautioning too against the rapprochement between Ukraine or Georgia and the PRC, including in the economic realm. That is also why Czechia has been calling for stronger European engagement with the region, which would close the gap that was in the past abused by the Chinese and Russian leadership, including in the security and military domains.

5. Czech-Polish Synergies

Czech-Polish synergies in Eastern Europe may be seen across the board, including in political and security as well as economic or energy dimensions. Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova are cases in point in this regard since they are more open to cooperation and closer integration with the Western community. For both Poland and Czechia, the region of Eastern Europe represents an essential strategic priority and Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova among their closest allies. Poland and Czechia should hence step up their cooperation with the region's actors, including most notably with Ukraine. Czechia should mobilise more political will and state support for political and economic cooperation with Ukraine, where Poland already has a strong network of ties. Both countries should do more together especially in the realm of economy and trade since their portfolios are not dissimilar and are in fact highly comparable. The year 2022 provides Poland and Czechia with a particular window of opportunity to increase synergies between their Eastern policies. In 2022 Poland will chair the OSCE. The Polish Chairmanship will focus especially on supporting conflict resolution and conflict-affected populations in the Black Sea region. On the other hand, Czechia will take over the EU presidency on the 1st of July 2022. Prague has already announced that the Eastern Partnership and security in the region will occupy a central place in the agenda of its presidency.



In terms of politics, Czech-Ukrainian ties are less intense and complex than Polish ones but excellent in nature, at the highest level unlike in the case of Poland where the last time a Polish PM visited Ukraine was six years ago, before the PiS-led government came to power.¹¹ One of the reasons for this is the question of historical memory, which the Czechs worked on when they established the Czech-Ukrainian Discussion Forum in 2019. On the other hand, Czechs should learn from the Poles on how to promote stronger security cooperation, including when looking at the Lithuanian-Polish-Ukrainian military brigade or the Lublin Triangle, which focuses on military and security challenges too. In addition, there is certainly a space for closer involvement of Czech experts in building up Ukraine's resilience, which might be modelled on the already existing Polish experience in the sphere of cyber security.

Economically speaking, Poland should be recognized as the EU member state with the most intensive ties to Ukraine. In 2021, Poland became the second largest trade partner of Ukraine (around 8%) surpassing Russia and Germany. Polish companies belong to a group of key direct investors in the country. In contrast to this, Czechia represents only 14th place for Ukraine. On the other hand, Czechia is the 8th most important partner for Ukraine among the EU member states, which makes it a rather valued trade ally, even if this cannot be compared with the Polish position. That is why there is a need for a more ambitious Czech state support to match the Polish ambitious position and develop the mutual partnerships in different sectors, including green and energy that are going to see a boost from the European investment plan.

In addition, Poland represents the main donor of Official Development Aid (ODA) to Ukraine. In 2018-2019, 6% of the entire ODA received by Ukraine originated from Poland, which gave it the fourth position after the EU institutions, Germany, and the US.¹² In comparison with that, Czechia plays a smaller role in terms of international projects and development cooperation which have been primarily funded from the Transitions Promotion Programme of the Czech MFA, bilateral sectoral ties as well as the Czech Development Agency programming. But Czech ODA in Ukraine remains greatly behind its potential and under Ukrainian needs.¹³ Nevertheless, both countries pursue their own national interests and policies, and so are not always well-coordinated in order to achieve more impact and benefit to Ukrainian society.

Finally, for both Czechia and Poland, the Ukrainian diaspora represents a significant part of their populations and a source of income. During 2014-19, Poland played a key role in that process becoming the top destination for Ukrainian labour immigration (often of seasonal character). Currently more than 600 thousand Ukrainians are officially registered by the Social Insurance Institution as employed in Poland.¹⁴ Moreover, around 40 thousand Ukrainians are studying right now at Polish universities, which decidedly outnumbers Russia as the most popular host country. Czechia has been also a traditional destination for Ukraine's labour migration, currently amounting to around 145 thousand, which is a relatively high figure in the Czech society, especially as it represents the largest diaspora in the

¹¹ In 2019, the Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš paid a visit to Kyiv and re-established good high-level ties with Volodymyr Zelensky as well as the business community that accompanied Babiš and the vice-PM Karel Havlíček during the official trip.

¹² OECD, "Receipts for Ukraine", https://public.tableau.com/views/OECDDACAIdata glancebyrecipient_new/Recipients?:embed=y&:display_count=yes&:showTabs=y&:toolbar=no&:showVizHome=no.

¹³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, "Human rights and transition promotion policy concept of the Czech Republic", https://www.mzv.cz/public/98/7c/e8/2239165_1648851_Human_rights_and_transition_promotion_policy_concept_of_the_Czech_Republic_.pdf.

¹⁴ Between 2014 and 2019 the ratio of remittances sent by Ukrainians working abroad to the GDP doubled from 5 % to 10 %, The World Bank In Poland, "World Bank, Statistics Poland, the Social Insurance Institution", <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/poland>.



country, ahead of Slovaks and the Vietnamese.¹⁵ Therefore, there is indeed space for investment into the humanitarian dimension of relations with Ukraine.

In Belarus, the Czech and Polish perspectives largely overlap too. Both countries see the regime in the same light and are ambitious enough in their approach to challenge it. Poland applies a comprehensive engagement and besides Germany, Lithuania and Czechia is one of the most important EU stakeholders. This is also why it was the Polish PM Morawiecki backed by his Czech counterpart Babiš who called for the extraordinary EU Council meeting on Belarus in August 2020. Most recently, the Czech government welcomed the leader of the Belarusian opposition, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, and in June 2021 promised to launch an official representation office of the Belarusian opposition, similar to that in Lithuania. Cooperation of both countries might also be illustrated by the recent Czech proposal to support Poland in the border crisis by sending its soldiers to protect the border with Belarus. Previously, Czechia was one of the first countries to send material help to Lithuania and dedicated special resources for management of the crisis.

Despite very tense bilateral political relations, Poland remains together with Germany the most important trade partner of Belarus among the EU member states (share around 4%, almost the same as Germany) but Polish direct investments are limited in the country.¹⁶ On the other hand, Czechia's economic cooperation with Belarus (especially bilateral foreign trade) has a downward tendency, especially due to the turbulent situation in the country. This is particularly the case for exports from Belarus that are increasingly subject to sanctions and the decreasing production capacity of an economy hit by domestic repressions, political instability and gradual economic slowdown.

Between 2018-2019, Poland allocated almost 75 million USD of ODA to Belarus, supporting especially the Belarusian democratic opposition, civil society and independent media. More than 20% of the entire ODA received by Belarus and Belarusians originated from Poland. As a consequence, Poland occupied second place after the EU institutions among donors of ODA assigned to Belarus.¹⁷ After the mass democratic demonstrations in August 2020, Poland assigned almost 10 thousand humanitarian visas to Belarussian citizens repressed by Lukashenka's regime.

Over the past year, Czechia has allocated a specialised extra fund of more than 500 thousand euros that was assigned for the response to the Belarusian crisis and repressions in the country, including in the form of the relocation and rehabilitation programme MEDEVAC, which helped more than 90 persons. On top of that, several humanitarian projects have been supported to help Belarus tackle the covid-19 pandemic. However, there is still huge need and space for considerably more Czech support for Belarusian society and stronger cooperation and common projects in the areas of people-to-people ties, relocations and rehabilitation and pro-democracy activities in the country. This might be driven by a new robust regional instrument that could be established by Poland and Czechia in order to close the gap between national and EU levels of support, which too often does not cover all the needs of those on the ground.

Poland also became, next to Russia, the most popular destination for Belarusian students enrolled abroad. Their number in Poland (10 thousand) increased several times in recent years and soon Poland may surpass Russia as the country hosting the largest number of Belarusian students in the world thanks to the K. Kalinowski stipend programme and a simplified procedure for their acceptance. The number of Belarusians working in Poland has also been on the rise considerably in recent years but still there is a very large untapped potential (around 60 thousand

¹⁵ Czech Statistical Office, "Bez cizincu by zamestnanost dlouhodobě nerostla", <https://www.czso.cz/csu/czso/bez-cizincu-by-zamestnanost-dlouhodobě-nerostla?fbclid=IwARobM4w6QAXC9DucLScpB8AO4Ol9ohatxYBko-L3IIUZBZX1fwOXZjnu-HM>.

¹⁶ Belstat, "Nacionalnyj statisticeskij komitet Respubliky Belarus", <https://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/>.

¹⁷ Ibid.



working legally and registered by the Social Insurance Institute).¹⁸ Czech diplomacy has been particularly active when using both bilateral and EU (EU4Belarus - SALT) tracks of funds for stipends and welcoming dozens of Belarusian students and academics who are now hosted at Czech universities across the country and have been able to find safe haven in Czechia since last year. However, both Czech and Polish approaches to the matter could be more closely coordinated and help for the people in need also sought from other less exposed countries that could contribute to the new regional fund for support.

In Georgia, Poland should partner up with Czechia on a larger scale of investment, particularly in infrastructure as well as the energy domain where Czechia has been particularly strong. Similar to Ukraine, Georgia also has strong Euro-Atlantic aspirations that both countries might better advocate for and bring to the negotiating table in the EU and NATO. This includes the Membership Action Plan (MAP) as well as the security situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and building up the resilience capability of the Georgian state, with which the Polish and Czech authorities might better help. Next year's NATO-Georgia exercise provides a good opportunity for such a kind of cooperation and practical involvement of both countries in the South Caucasus. Finally, pressure from Russia should be countered more efficiently, for which Czechia and Poland should be working more closely together, particularly in the OSCE, EU and elsewhere in the multilateral fora.

The field of energy and the green economy in Georgia provides an ideal opportunity for future synergies, also thanks to EU future investment plans. The Czech pro-export institutions, including EGAP, the Export Bank and others provide a solid pillar of support for investment in the region, which might be expanded with more active cooperation with their Polish counterparts in order to attract investment and resources into critical infrastructure and a higher level of sustainability and resilience in the economic system, including energy, in the country.

Moldova represents a special case since in this case, both Czechia and Poland might be helping each other to achieve common goals. Czechs have been particularly strong in their development cooperation and work on the local and regional level, which Poland complements with developed economic ties and business projects. The new Moldovan authorities are also increasingly interested in energy cooperation, in which both Poland and Czechia as well as other regional players, such as Romania, should be investing much more. The country is also in deep need of a restructuring of public affairs and an unrooting of the deep state from Plahotniuk's and Dodon's times where Czechia and Poland can help by sharing their experience with the post-1989 transformation and getting rid of the monopolistic position of companies and political powers.

The economic relations of both countries with Moldova (in absolute numbers) are less prominent than with Ukraine and Belarus, but have an upward trend and are significant in terms of the local and regional development or development aid cooperation of both actors. Czechia is the 5th most important economic partner of Moldova among the EU countries. In 2021 its share in Moldova's trade volume surpassed 2%. Nevertheless, Czech direct investment and ODA are limited.

From the Polish perspective, Moldova distinguishes itself from the South Caucasus because of its geographical proximity and by relatively more intensive relations with Poland. For instance, as far as Moldova's foreign trade is concerned, Poland occupies fourth place among the EU members and its share approaches 4% of the entire Moldovan trade volume. Nevertheless, Polish direct investment in Moldova is very limited (around 1% of the total FDI stocks). Poland also allocated only a small amount of its ODA to the country (less than 1% of the entire ODA in 2018-2019). On the other hand, the Polish market is gaining popularity among

¹⁸ Social Insurance Institute, "The Social Insurance Institution (ZUS) – general information", <https://lang.zus.pl>.



Moldovan labour immigrants.. Poland's rising interest in Moldova is confirmed by the fact that in September 2021 the Polish government nominated a Plenipotentiary for Supporting Reforms in the Republic of Moldova. In consequence, the Polish engagement in Moldova may increase considerably in the coming months

Finally, Poland and Czechia are well-perceived in both Armenia and Azerbaijan which both benefit from their rather active foreign policies in the South Caucasus, development cooperation as well as humanitarian aid related to the conflict over Nagorno Karabakh. Poland is going to play a very important role during its OSCE Chairmanship in 2022 which will reinforce the long-lasting role of the OSCE Ambassador for Nagorno Karabakh Andrzej Kasprzyk, who hails from Poland. Resolution of the regional conflicts as well as human rights and protection of minorities, including religious ones, are on the list of Polish presidency priorities. In addition, the Czech EU presidency in the second half of 2022 might also have powerful implications for the regional conflicts, especially since the topics of resilience and a practical approach to security as well as relations with Russia as a major player in this domain are going to feature high on the agenda.

6. Conclusions

Poland and Czechia are likely to find new synergies and improve their cooperation in Eastern Europe rather considerably since there is an increasingly convergent set of interests and shared positions in the region between both countries, especially after the confirmation of Russian responsibility for the terrorist attack in Vrbětice in Czechia. This is the case both for sharing a positive vision and strategy for the region and for countering the Russian and to some degree also the Chinese influence and operations across Central and Eastern Europe.

However, the ongoing bilateral and EU-centric problems (e.g. the Turów coal mine, the issue of Poland's relations with EU institutions) represent the main challenges to the short-term improvement and quick fixes of the current state of play. These need to be overcome to allow for a new momentum in bilateral ties, which are approaching a new moment thanks to the new government led by Poland's rather friendly coalition of parties.

Concerning Russia, which should be perceived as a state that is losing its soft power and economic position in the region. It may be assumed that the country's leadership is going to become even more aggressive, using military force and pressure against its Eastern European neighbours and provoking incidents with the EU countries bordering it and Belarus. In the worst-case scenario the incidents may run out of control, as everyone is now carefully observing in the case of the Belarusian migration crisis on the borders with Poland, Lithuania and Latvia.

In the economic sphere, Russian influence may decrease even further with the development of energy saving, renewable energy and "traditional" infrastructure (pipelines, interconnectors, stock storages, LNG ports, own resources of coal, etc.) with the EU and its neighbours, which should become even more of a priority for Brussels now. Some of these trends and increased investment are going to be endorsed by the upcoming EU Eastern Partnership Summit in December 2021.

The situation in Eastern Europe may change (but not inevitably) dramatically in the case of the fall of Putin's regime (or its liberalization) or a serious internal crisis in Russia. These scenarios cannot be completely excluded but are at this stage rather unlikely from a midterm perspective.

The further rise of China and Turkey's leverage in the region should be expected which Poland and Czechia should reckon with and take into consideration when dealing with the region. The internal situation in Turkey is particularly fragile and may influence the region positively or negatively in the future. The democratisation of Turkey, which is a relatively probable scenario, will definitely increase chances for more cooperation between the EU, including Poland and Czechia, and Ankara. On the other hand, the destabilization of Turkey's economy may



have a serious negative spillover on the EU's Eastern neighbourhood. China's democratization in the medium term is highly unlikely. Moreover, most probably, China's influence in the region will only increase in the future, but the Eastern Partnership region will not gain a key position in the Chinese foreign policy agenda. This means that China's engagement in the region may, due to probable further deepening of cooperation between Moscow and Beijing on the global scene, help Russia to counter the EU's involvement in the region.

In any case, Poland and Czechia should be paying much closer attention to the rising influence of China and Turkey in the region and trying to better align their positions with the EU and NATO. This requires, especially from Warsaw, a recognition that the Eastern Neighbourhood represents an important arena of global rivalry between antagonistic political, social and economic models (liberal democracy, the rule of law guaranteeing the rights of minorities and individuals, free market economy vs. authoritarian nationalistic regime, corruption, state crony capitalism).



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The publication is supported by the Czech-Polish Forum of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic.