# NATIONAL SECURITY IN THE UNSAFE WORLD: A CENTRAL EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

Twenty-five years ago, in the aftermath of the cold war and after the fall of Communist regimes in Europe, perception of the security situation in Europe was dominated by optimism. Most of us believed that the century-old history of wars and hostility has come to its end. Such optimism was based on three main arguments:

(1) The perspective of the world dominated by the United States led to the belief that the American leadership would lead to the peaceful resolution of conflicts and to the gradual expansion (by peaceful means) of liberal-democratic values. *Pax Americana* was seen as the fundamentally better alternative to ideological confrontation and to the conflicts based on national egoisms.

(2) The peaceful transformation of political climate in Europe, symbolized by the reconciliation between former enemies (German-French reconciliation followed by the German-Polish reconciliation) created hopes for friendly relations between former enemies.

(3) The disappearance of the ideological super-power – USSR – and the change of regime in Russia, as well as the weakening of her international position, were seen as guarantees of new, friendly relations between European nations.

In the following years the extension of NATO and of the European Union provided the Central European region with unprecedented feeling of security. Even the ethnic wars in former Yugoslavia have not weakened such atmosphere of

security, partly because the NATO intervention in these military conflicts (in Bosnia-and – Herzegovina and in Kosovo) put an end to the war phases of these confrontations.

Only few authors argued for caution and challenged the prevailing optimism. One of them was the prominent Israeli political scientist (and my good friend of many years) Shlomo Avineri. In an essay on Eastern Europe, Avineri warned about the possibility of a "return to history", by which he meant the heritage of authoritarianism and nationalism in East-Central Europe (Avineri 1992). The other was Samuel P. Huntington who – in his famous book on "three waves of democratization" – warned about the possibility of a "reverse wave" caused by "authoritarian nationalism", "religious fundamentalism", "oligarchic authoritarianism", "populist dictatorships" and/or "populist dictatorships" (Huntington 1991:293-294).

The most radical versions of such scenarios have not materialized – at least for the time being. In post-cold war East-Central Europe no democratic regime has been overthrown by force and no dictatorship has been established. While recent developments in Hungary and Poland lead many of us to the critical evaluation of the "new authoritarianism" (Wiatr 2017), they have not created dangers to peaceful relations between nations of our part of Europe.

Today however, there are reasons to be concerned for the long-term implications of the political changes which took place in the early years of the 21th century. Four such changes are of greatest importance for the security situation of the nations of Central Europe (as well as for the others).

The first is the crisis of American leadership. It has been caused by the adoption of the highly ideological approach to American foreign policy, particularly during the George W. Bush's presidency. In early February 2001, I attended the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington at which the newly elected president delivered his first important speech on the aims of American foreign

policy. President Bush argued that it was God's will to entrust the United States with the mission of promoting democracy all over the world and that he – as the president – considered his sacred duty to fulfil this mission. Rarely have I heard such clear declaration of the ideological nature of foreign policy. Soon after the terrorist attacks of September 2001, the United States (with support of the United Kingdom and some other states, including Poland) launched a war against Iraq, The Iraqi war turned out to become a major debacle for American position in the world. While militarily it was a fast success, politically it turned out to become a catastrophic defeat. Zbigniew Brzezinski has identified three main consequences of the war. First, it caused "calamitous damage to America's global standing" and "has discredited America's global leadership" . Second, it "has been a geopolitical disaster". Third, "it has increased the terrorist threat to the United States" (Brzezinski 2007: 146-149). It is mostly because of the Iraqi fiasco that Brzezinski called the Bush presidency "catastrophic". In the aftermath of the war, the weakening of the American leadership undermined the trust of other nations in the effectiveness the alliance with the United States and encouraged some other states to take a more assertive stand in international relations.

The second factor, closely related to the first, is the growth of international terrorism. While not a new phenomenon, the terrorism of the present century became a qualitatively new factor in world politics. It is no longer limited to a single state (or region). It became truly international. No nation of the world can feel secure any more. Even the most aggressive policies directed against the terrorists have not been able to prevent the continuous repetition of terrorist acts.

Consequences of the Arab Spring have been disappointing – contrary to the early assessments in the majority of Western media and academic circles – and have become the third factor in the worsening of political climate. With the exception of Tunisia, all Arab states affected by the upheavals either turned to renewed autocratic regimes (Egypt) or fell in the state of prolonged civil wars

(Libya. Syria, Yemen). The war in Syria produced the emergence of the “Islamic State”, a terrorist stronghold for religious fanatics committed to the idea of the world caliphate. Because of support given to the two sides in the Syrian civil war, the United States and the Russian Federation find themselves in a precarious position with potentially dangerous consequences.

The fourth factor of the new international situation is the growing strength and assertiveness of the regional powers - China and Russia – which challenge the world hegemony of the United States. From the perspective of Central Europe it is the new role of the Russian Federation which causes concern. Before trying to address the question of the Russian challenge, I should like to stress the fact that there has been a direct link between the failure of American foreign policy and the growing assertiveness of the Russian Federation. The weakening of the American power encouraged Russia to challenge the world hegemony of the United States, particularly in the regions close to Russia and considered Russia’s “close neighborhood”.

Crucial for the security of Central Europe is the role of the Russian Federation as the strongest regional power in close vicinity of the eastern frontiers of the European Union. Is Russia a real threat to our security? Is she likely to provoke a new war, as predicted by the former deputy chief of NATO forces British general Richard Shirreff in his newly published political fiction (Shirreff 2016)? In his fictitious scenario, Russia invades Latvia and is finally defeated by the combined efforts of NATO and local Latvian partisan forces but the conflict remains confined to the Baltic area and do not escalate to the level of the third world war.

Serious discussion of the Russian challenge requires an understanding of the political transformation of Russia after the fall of Communist regime and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Internally, the post-Soviet period of Russian history has been marked by the chaotic years of Boris Yeltsin presidency, defined

by Klaus von Beyme as “anocracy” – a combination of autocracy and anarchy (Beyme 1995:166), and by the neo-authoritarian rule of Vladimir Putin in the 21th century. The failure of democratic transformation has had its roots both in the Russian political culture (including the heritage of the totalitarian dictatorship in the last century) and in the mistaken policy of the democratic West which refused to offer Russia badly needed economic assistance in the first years of its transition from Communist dictatorship. Putin’s rule has been marked by successful efforts to restore Russia’s position as great power. It is this aspect of his rule which, according to public opinion surveys, explains his strong popularity among Russian citizens (Shestopal 2016).

From the perspective of the Central European nations the crucial question is whether Russia of today constitutes a real danger to our security. I am convinced that she does not. In this, I oppose the dominant political narration in my own country. There are two main reasons for my position.

First, Russia is not an ideological power (like the former Soviet Union) and does not intend to export her political system and political philosophy to the rest of the world. Her national interest dictates the policy of regional hegemony within the geographically close vicinity of former Soviet republics and parts of Asia closest to the Russian borders.

Second, Russian leaders are well aware of the potentially disastrous consequences of attacking a member of NATO. Only a lunatic would risk the war with NATO – the most powerful military alliance in world history.

Because of these two factors, I do not perceive Russia as a direct threat to the security of Central Europe. This does not mean, however, that conflicts with Russia can be excluded from our strategic thinking. It would be naïve to ignore the possibility of such conflicts, but it would also be wrong to exaggerate their impact on our security.

Recently, the Ukrainian crisis resulted in the deterioration of our relations with Russia not because of a direct danger to our security but because of the determination of the European Union to protect Ukrainian sovereignty endangered by the annexation of Crimea and by Russian-supported secession in the eastern provinces of Ukraine. To understand this conflict one should go back to the precarious Russian-Ukrainian relations after the dissolution of the USSR. From the very beginning it was obvious that the ethnically Russian majority resented the incorporation of Crimea to Ukraine and wished its returned to Russia (Bebler 2015:189-207). Until the crisis of 2014, Russian position on this issue was subordinated to the strategic consideration according to which close relations between two states were given preference to the interests and demands of the Crimean people. This has changed in early 2014, when the overthrown of the pro-Russian president Victor Yanukovich and the radical reorientation of Ukrainian foreign policy caused the Russian government to abandon its cautious stand on the Crimean issue and to offer support (perhaps even encouragement) to the secessionists in the Donbas region. While NATO and the EU have had good reasons to offer political assistance to Ukraine and to oppose Russia on this particular issue, it would be a mistake to subordinate the totality of our relations with Russia to the resolution of the Ukrainian conflict. There are other important issues in which co-operation with the Russian Federation is vital for the security of Europe, including the solution to the civil war in Syria, the struggle against international terrorism and containing the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

Political realism tells us that conflicts between regional powers cannot be ruled out. In the world of today they result from national interests rather than from fundamentally hostile ideological commitments as it had been the case during the cold war. Conflicts of such nature should not, however, be seen as catastrophic. Moreover, I am convinced that the only way to the resolution of such conflicts (Ukrainian included) is through a compromise – not very likely in the nearest future, but inevitable in a longer perspective.

More difficult to deal with are two other challenges: international terrorism and the flow of refugees from the Middle East and North Africa. These two issue call for unity of the democratic states and for a serious rethinking of our global strategy.

International terrorism constitutes the most dangerous challenge to our security because by its very nature it makes compromise solutions impossible. Central Europe has not been targeted by international terrorists yet, but it would be a dangerous mistake to assume that this state of affairs will last forever. It is, therefore, imperative that we close ranks with our allies in Western Europe and in America to collectively stand up to this challenge. It is also essential that we seriously address the social and political roots of the problem, including the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

European solidarity is also necessary for finding a realistic solution to the refugee issue. Unlimited admission of refugees from war-affected region of Middle East and Africa is not a realistic policy, because it inevitably would cause the continuous growth of the number of potential migrants. On the other hand, both from moral and from political reasons it is wrong to wash our hands and to leave this issue exclusively to those states which have been directly affected by the influx of refugees. What is at issue is not only the fate of the refugees but the cohesion of the European Union.

What practical recommendations can we draw this analysis? I should offer four suggestions.

First, maintain and strengthen the unity and solidarity of the community of democratic nations of Europe and North America. Stand up to all attempts to weaken the European integration and oppose the policies of national egoism and isolationism.

Second, follow the policy of compromise and avoid the temptation to impose our will on others. Keep in mind that compromise is not a capitulation. Avoid double-standards in evaluating policies of friends and adversaries.

Third, avoid subordination of our foreign policy to ideology, even it would mean abandoning the dreams of a "crusade for democracy". Keep in mind the dramatic consequences of the ideologically motivated war with Iraq as the crucial caveat for the future.

Fourth, deal realistically and collectively with the refugee problem and with international terrorism and be ready to undertake necessary burdens in solidarity with the rest of the community of democratic nations.

This will not make Central Europe immune from dangers which characterize the world of today. Security analysis is not a recipe for a utopia but an intellectual instrument for making our practical policies more effective.

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