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**Crossroads in the East: CEE's Approach to Post-Pandemic
Continental Systems and Global Politics**

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Abstract

The research overlooks the CEE' spaces, through the prism of international relation's core paradigms, by understanding that a plenitude of global dynamics and connex unfolding paved the way for a transitory stage between relative uncertainty – negative certainty. Thus, it addresses the matter of how CEE actors interacted in the post-pandemic period, by underlining recent continental and global vectors and, subsequently, their synergic modulations. As such, paralleled by unprecedented geopolitical, geoeconomic, and geostrategic shifts, recent developments created a suite of contradictory movements across the international systems. Therefore, by examining present socio-economic and political evolutions, juxtaposed with prospective trends, we can observe CEE's emerging role. Hence, we can underline that some regional actors' pursuit of independent pathways has become more stringent during the pandemic, hindering at times further EU consolidation or integration efforts.

Additionally, observing public narratives or voting patterns, which balance towards authoritarian capitalism, makes us oversee demos' perception regarding CEE' statehood and EU participation, aspect which bridges EU integration with sovereignty losses, altering foreign policies' implementation.

Hence, as post-pandemic data suggests, there seems to be a soft reset on these inclinations, as the area performed relatively better, all whilst receiving considerate support from the bloc, repositioning itself in the continental networks, especially through a sustainable socio-economic integration. Also, considering continental and global reordering, EU's strategic initiatives implementation proves to impactfully alter CEE's trajectories, generating results like those recorded during the accession periods, especially under co-managed multilevel interconnectedness frameworks. Furthermore, closer binding of CEE, both between itself and toward the EU's core, alongside its larger neighbourhood, enables Brussels to take steps towards a resilient knitted community and strengthens its actorship, agency and autonomy.

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1. Introduction

If we oversee how cyclical hegemonic power cycles operate, we can note that COVID-19 might represent the 21st century first game changer momentum, especially for small powers, dissipating across all socio-economic, political, and institutional assemblages. Throughout the emergence of systemic manoeuvrings, the CEE arena, came out from the pandemic with relatively modest backdrops, if not even gained a better intra and inter-actor positioning (Baranovsky et al., 2019). Albeit this fact, overcoming future crises, especially across the socio-economic realms, will require CEE actors to possess increased resilience and faster readjustment capabilities, as they must ride through highly shifting global and continental affairs (Miranda, 2021).

Therefore, by exploring how these states adapted in the past, we can oversee the patterns they will mostly likely employ when dealing with the new post-pandemic realities. Aspects which will be filtered through IR and macroeconomic lenses, in juxtaposition with a selection of empirical evidence. As such, the interpretation draws from these spatial and temporal boundaries, in parallel with EU's frameworks and commonly presented global changes, using situational analysis, accounting for the multifactorial impact, all while contouring some remarks about prospective pathways.

2. Frameworks and Approaches: New Systemic Modulations

By analysing the speciality literature, we can underline how the pandemic fostered the establishment of new interconnections and frameworks across the international arena, enhancing latent fractures and palettes of threats for both statal and non-statal actors. The erosion of global orders was exacerbated by these processes, as mid-2010s uncertain systems were replaced by negative certainty, a specificity which encapsulates adverse causalities, even though some believe it is merely a by-product of global developments (Kaplow and Gartzke, 2021). Hence, as conceptualisations showcase, even the simple existential presence of emerging threats seems to demand well-founded, long-term, responsible, altruistic, sustainable governance, and self-restraint.

Moreover, seeing how the pandemic generated a tragedy of the commons, we can expect clashes between states to occur even in a post-COVID world. Thus, since fighting the virus and its adjacent effects represented mostly a national burden, growing anti-globalisation tendencies, fuelled by populist-dogmatic narratives, forced authorities to employ isolationist and protectionist toolboxes (Alexandri, Janoschka, 2020). This led to a paradigmatic approach towards threats, especially in quantitative policymaking, an aspect felt across regional powers.

Thereafter, it became clear that current challenges and their drivers present intertwined suites of specificities, so complex that even hegemonic powers struggle to meaningfully contain them on their own. (Allen et al., 2020; Yang, 2020) This meant that a reassembly of international formats was required, balancing globalisation and self-sufficiency, as most actions demanded collective action-taking

to mitigate risks and increase future resilience. Thus, states were forced to choose between consolidation / reasonable globalisation; integration / fragmentation; encapsulation of foreign threats/ communitarian intersections; dominance of national interests/ accounting for global ones, amongst others (Zhou, 2023).

Apart from these paradigmatic divergences, an ideological wall arose as authorities sought to balance necessary control exertion (interventionism) or the respect of democratic freedoms and individual liberties. As Orwell's Problem demonstrated, and Borrell (2020) put it „the temptation is great, we can come to a digital form of authoritarianism, ... leading to an erosion of personal freedoms, ... as we have gone beyond Orwell”, concerns were raised that restrictive measures might over last the pandemic, especially across CEE countries, leading to difficult internal climates.

Moreover, another impediment takes the form of socio-economic fluctuations, in which a key role is played by nation-states' craftsmanship, or cross-border measures (for CEE being those under the EU's aegis or through the B9, 3SI, DRS, etc. umbrellas). Hence, international communities are generally tasked with creating new social contracts, tied together by growth prospects and welfare guarantees, all which account for pre-pandemic avenues and post-pandemic realities. Aspects particularly necessary across societies marked by the crisis model exacerbation and distrust towards neoliberal solutions, as they faced: deepening social inequalities, disenfranchisement from elites, migratory flows, asymmetrical security issues, increased monetary, financial and fiscal turbulences, economic slowdown or recession, all vectors that brew societal dissension movements. (Stiglitz, 2019)

Therefore, any continental or global reordering will go against a suite of traditional challenges – from environmental, climate, energy, or food security all the way to great power competition, armed conflicts, insurgencies, intra-organisational tensions etc., especially since „the pandemic is likely to strengthen existing geopolitical dynamics” (Borrell, 2020). As such, within the post-communist spheres, nation states employed divergent position from those of leading powers to fulfil their desiderates, contrary to an integratory logic.

3. Overlapping Spheres: CEE's Currents across Current Events

From CEE's revolutionary moments, a profound societal re-rooting took place, moulding economic, socio-cultural, and political landscapes, in a bid to create a modern(ised) identity. A transition, underlining in behavioural patterns a prospective cvasi-positivist vision and reminiscences of missed „Belle Epoque”, peaking during the pandemic, as milestones were regionally celebrated, from 1-2 decades of NATO adhesion (12 countries), to one 1-1.5 in the EU (10 countries), in parallel with other preparing for their accession. (Orlowski, 2019) Thus, population satisfaction and preference for these frameworks are quite high, in line with Eurostat measurements.

Hence, we can observe how even a politically euro-sceptic Warsaw, economically reserved Prague, or alternatively oriented Budapest exceeded EU-28 median rankings, with solely Sofia and Zagreb falling behind

(Eurobarometer reports). Furthermore, since values remained constant throughout the post-pandemic period, this highlights the growing public's inclination toward Western interconnections.

Albeit this fact, an in-depth analysis underlines the adoption of a second-class Europe mentality, vision only accentuated by some uneven spill over of continental socio-economic advancements. For instance, as Pew Research Center's reports prove, even though within the CEE space the proportion of favourable attitudes was higher than those in older Member States, the values remained stagnant or even decreased (Wike et al., 2019).

This can be explained since freed from USSR's grip, CEE states embarked on a revisionist and integratory journey founded on two pillars: strategic, operational, and security driven transatlanticism (NATO/US partnerships) and socio-economically pushed westernisation and Europeanisation (EU/GP cooperation), both required a comprehensive transfer of power. Thus, this transaction-based model was spined by political factions into an ostracised loss of capacities, only exacerbated by crisis times, although the citizens tend to embrace this redistribution as a necessity, if it bears tangible benefits.

Illustrative of how this phenomenon can be counteracted is the example of Poland and Romania, as established regional powers, economically and politically committed to regional development, which, when faced with definitory pushbacks, from Brexit, COVID-19 to Russia's war in Ukraine, they only strengthened their ambitions in implementing recovery strategies in the CEE space (Razvan, 2022).

Furthermore, as the Eurobarometer suggests, the populations of both countries approve of further inclusion in the EU bloc (approx. 70 %), their main source of satisfaction is from infrastructure projects (80 %), environmental impact (70 %), rule of law and democratic consolidation (55 %), security and defence (75 %), global prestige (60 %). Aspects that represent strategic intervention areas that can be regionally scaled when seeking renewed allegiance to EU's programs, and which can form the basis of a new pan-European closeness, as studies in the pandemic proved that 60-70% of people positively regarded Brussels' actions, more than national authorities.

Moreover, programmatic approaches and enhancement of support programs, can prove beneficial for post-pandemic coagulations, as Globsec (2022) notes that positive consequences and societal cascading are making more than 50 % of CEE's citizens to feel European, without weakening their national sentiments, leading to shared cross-border closeness. However, in several similarly ranked states, the data suggests increased patriotic perspectives, with a spike during the pandemic, which correlates with nuanced opinions when it comes to deepening European ties or even expansionist prospects (Kavalski, 2021).

This means that post-pandemic East-West approaches will be sedimented upon a dissatisfaction with limitations of national capacities, or even fear of further losses, alongside a rather positive outlook of EU evolutions and its impact (Nasir, 2022). Idea further reflected when overseeing CEE foreign policy stances, as they adopt flexible positions and defend their redlines, even to the point of sabotaging grander

plans, if necessary, from Hungary's vaccine or energy imports, Poland's electric car transitioning, Czechia's industrial alliances, as way of example.

These dualistic approaches were accentuated during the last crises, especially as the student-teacher relation with Brussels reached its maturity and CEE nation-states become more of a partnership of equals, with the latter aspiring to preserve pre-eminent membership benefits while minimising obligations, even if it meant accepting that autonomous pursuits weaken the community's cohesion.

Furthermore, socio-economic stats showcase how by 2019 GDP growth (absolute and relative) in CEE was three times that of EU-27 medians, whereas unemployment remained below the average (2.0 to 6.3 % compared to 6.7-7.5 %). (EEF, 2020) Similarly, negative state budgets varied between 0.2-0.7 %, below the Eurozone, or even reached positive levels 0.3-2.1 %, and as the list can continue, it is worth noting that these achievements are due to EU market access and financial support schemes. (EEF, 2022) In addition, the tripling of CEE's GDP per capita and PPP, alongside associated values, greatly impacted the continental economy, as some estimated that the EU MS compensated almost 80 % of their FDI and indirect expenditures through these growths (Ban, Adascalitei, 2022).

Otherwise, even though the potential of CEE is proven across a variety of indicators, donor countries are not interested in expanding the CPF, believing that they have met their aims. The aspect was best observed during CAP negotiations, one of CEE's priorities, as MFF positions sought to restrain Green Deal's ambitions and steer away into other strategic areas.

Albeit these contexts, which paved the way for prospective „tigers” in the area, CEE remained a peripheral area to EU's overall growth, as for instance during the pandemic, with shares of 22.4 % of the population their participation on the bloc's GDP was 10.5 % and, respectively, 7.1 % in tertiary exports. A peripherality also preserved in values from productivity, competitiveness, innovation, or complexity, all but small exceptions, and mostly proven in their globalisation, as indexes ranked a handful of CEE states on par or above their Western counterparts, meaning flows are regionally and continentally oriented, generating a co-dependency with the EU (SEI, 2019).

Whereas in economic terms consolidation is required, social periphery is closing faster, since CEE's prominent role in supranational decision making was accentuated, particularly due to the war which marked post-pandemic Europe. Hence, in current and forthcoming elections, CEE countries are seen consolidating their collective positions, monetising their common political weight, and shaping budgeting, migration, institutional etc. policies with a rather consistent lobbying system (Orenstein, Bugaric, 2022).

Also, this coagulation enables the region to spearhead its own initiatives, from Warsaw's European Reunification Declaration, V4's pandemic funds, to B9's post-war US and NATO mediation, 3SI's North-South doctrine, amongst others, bypassing Franco-German core's interests and promoting closeness regionally and with WB6 or EaP partners, as part of the expanded neighbourhood. These interlinkages can bear results, as V4's 2012 Friends of the Cohesion Policy group

(17 states) prevented MFF reduction in the 2014-2020/2021-2027 cycles, arguing for increased allocation towards CEE' strategic areas (Frumkin, 2019). This intertwined expression of will works even better when backed by others, as Budapest, Bratislava, and Prague, along with Paris, made quite a stance on the preservation of nuclear energy, showcasing a comprehensive capacity to outwardly engage in continental politics.

Moreover, prior to COVID-19, riding a strengthened socio-economic wave and reaffirmed geopolitical capabilities, CEE states tended to reduce their EU alignment, advocating (in a form of economic patriotism) for preferential budgeting. Thus, these trajectories, coupled with the pandemic effects, led some to push for decentralisation, embracing ideas like a Europe of Fatherlands (Orenstein, Bugaric, 2022).

Instances of the bloc's impeachment, although producing some electoral breakthroughs, were mostly contained, fading after the pandemic, although this democratic erosion can further generate EU-wide en-bloc rifts, if developments are not made to support not only CEE's economic growth but also a (re)consolidation of democratic practises, rule of law, and civil societies, especially under existing socio-political dichotomies (internal and external).

4. Pandemic Support: Brussel's Reaffirmation in The CEE

As data suggests, CEE presented increased resilience when faced with the pandemic, partially due to less permeated borders (lower globalisation hubs and relative diversity), share of highly affected sectors (production-oriented), moderate density and elder populations. Also, the socio-political climate, based on previously centralised mechanisms, meant easier enforcement of stricter measures, maintaining higher support rates (55-72 %). Additionally, having a head start, introducing bans before WHO's declaration of the EU as an epicentre, enabled faster socio-economic reopening and reduced expenditures.

In parallel, whereas healthcare is not a direct EU competence, regional formats took primacy, an instance being Romania's early PPE manufacturing, distribution and stocking lines, supporting regional or continental flows and a sense of solidarity. These interlinkages enabled increased country branding and facilitated, when faced with 2nd waves, demands for support, as 68 % of CRII funds were directed to CEE.

Thus, these dynamics led to lower GDP, unemployment, deficit, and inflation rates being recorded, especially compared to Eurozone partners. However, as the long-term support for businesses and access to financial lines become scarcer, it is possible that West-East growth rates to converge, especially as more established economies possess a wider inventory (assets, FDI attractiveness, demographics, etc.). Albeit this prospective, in the meanwhile pan-European recovery programs (SRII, SURE, RRF, etc.) seems to position the CEE countries on a sustainable growth pathway, as the Commission juxtaposed MFF 2021-2027 avenues with 2021-2023 Next Gen short-term interventions, fostering recovery and alignment with clear strategic lines (Porte, Jensen, 2021).

Otherwise, the post-pandemic MFF frameworks, although altered by recent evolutions, maintain core directions (from migration, defense, infrastructure to

digitalisation, youth and sustainability), many already entrenched into CEE's economic developments, reaffirming the latter's intertwined financial measures with the EU's prospects, especially by sparing burdensome national external borrowings. Also, such assistance measures, pioneered by Berlin and Paris, have geostrategic advancements, as they secured CEE's cross-institutional support and gained their pledges to follow sound economic policies and ambitious reforms.

Through this *de jure* symbiosis (support schemes – integratory and development strategies), a *de facto* reinforcement of supranational norms occurred, CEE stepping towards what some consider prerequisites for enhanced economic standardisation or socio-political unification. (Entin, Galushko, 2021) Brussel further sealed this situation, described as safeguarding EU's global primacy in a post-pandemic world where nation-states have no future, by assuming the common debt of the MS, as it means renewed attributes, without the hassle of singular financial bodies (Brzechczyn, 2020). Hence, as the necessary grants are knitted with subsequent strategies (Green Deal, EU's DTS, Global EU, etc.), alongside mechanisms which creates convergence of interests (the need to convince MS/EU institutions of the priorities order), CEE entered a game where their political willpower is direct at maximising external benefits through a collaborative mentality. Although setting new directions, the negotiation processes led to new balancing acts, as some CEE states blocked the Quartet from limiting funds to most affected economies, while Brussels menaced the cutting of several fundings due to rule of law or human rights issues. A stalemate, which will mark prospective endeavours, was reached after the pandemic's ups and downs which shifted continental dynamics (EU's initial slowness and loss of credibility – rise of national autonomy and agency – Brussel's traction gained through support schemes).

5. CEE in The World: From Continental Players to Global Systems

Although I. Krastev (2017, 20-50) mentioned that disintegration never occurs in the periphery, CEE's post-crisis evolutions will shape European affairs, with a close attention being paid on their foreign policy dimensions. This is because their position already transcended that of the limitrophe region, which V.L. Tsymbursky (1999, 140-143) defines as geopolitically contested spaces bordering civilisational platforms, especially as Europe's geostrategic epicentre moved East, overlapping interests, including those of tertiary actors, within and without the region. Thus, catching on the wind-change, especially noting the demand for leadership-based foreign policy crafting to fill-in power voids, CEE leveraged their geostrategic and geoeconomic positions, as a switch from pre-pandemic inertia towards postured, complex, encompassing and collaborative interference into the global systems.

Therefore, EU's reorientation is most likely to showcase a greater political and economic impact on CEE's ties beyond traditional boundaries, as they will shift how regional initiatives (V4, 3SI, B9, DRS, etc.) and international ones (14+1, BRI, NATO, etc.) are conducted, especially towards a continental recentring, as for instance Rail/Via Baltica or Carpatica are seeing operational plans shifted. Thus, we can note how emerging projects focus primarily on clustering CEE spaces, unifying

their socio-economic links, and turning across the N/S and E/W axes. (Pavlicevic, 2019; Schimmelfennig, 2021) Also, even though regional programs exist, generating their own *micro-modus operandi*, their size does not yet replace EU intervention, especially when it comes to tackling major challenges. Yet, these structures have become a double-edged sword, as they engage in trajectories divergent from the bloc, especially when interacting with tertiary powers.

As such, from the pandemic, but mainly considering current tensions, CEE countries shifted their foreign affairs behaviour toward military-industrial complexes, promoting programmes with security and defence undertones, arguing that they bear the burden of ensuring NATO's most threatening flanks. (Labov, 2019) This revamped transatlanticism ensured their position at the negotiations table and created new brokerage opportunities, especially regarding pan-European affairs. A tendency which can mean a new instrumentalisation of global politics and regional emergence, especially as CEE states have managed to place high-ranking officials in key structures. (Romania's NATO DSG, Czechia's EDA Dir., etc.).

Additionally, CEE has already implemented steps to establish themselves as a gateway of international flows, and subsequently gatekeeper, independent of EU, setting new boundaries in their larger neighbourly relations, through careful narrative building and convergence, especially towards Belarus, Russia, Serbia, etc. Attitudes which denote a regional willpower to shift historical memories and present-day factuality into cohesive actions, bearing cross-structural repercussions, although some interest-driven band wagoning still occurs.

6. Conclusions

We can note that the synergy of negative factors, against a complicated international context, will be a determinant vector for CEE's ambivalent role in international processes. Hence, this dynamic will grow in parallel with their own processes of constructing a collective identity and increasing their external socio-economic initiatives.

In this sense, a responsible instrumentalisation of Brussels' resources will enable them to become pivotal and attractive points, if innovative and integratory solutions are taken towards a continental harmonisation. As CEE states gain traction, their public imagery seems to support such trajectories, despite surfacing populist discourses, if tangible benefits are provided for the sovereignty losses.

However, despite the current increased autonomy, agency, and capacity, especially in light of Eastern challenges, the global role of CEE will remain linked to the EU, although the former retains increased influence or even an equal position when it comes to matters concerning the developments of WB6 or EaP. Whereas for the post-Brexit union, CEE can serve as an eastward bridge head (dispensing power and socio-economic influence), while returning increased added-value to the community, if properly engaged in the community.

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