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INDIVISIBILITY AND REGIONALIZATION IN THE EUROPEAN SECURITY DURING THE POST-COLD WAR PERIOD. CASE STUDY: CENTRAL EUROPE

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SUMMARY

The research subject we propose is motivated by the need to assess the model of building security in the Central Europe region (CE) against the background of systemic unpredictability. Regionalization is a relatively new concept, its practical assertion dating from the early twentieth century in the context of the major systemic changes that followed the end of the First World War. Located in the „clashing" area of two hegemonic power, namely Germany and Russia/USSR, Central Europe historically accounted for an area of hegemonic competition and geopolitical rivalry, a ground of confrontation for the ambitions of the great European powers, each trying to fill the security *vacuum* in the middle of Europe by subordinating or connecting this space to their own hegemonic agenda. Such an approach was translated into constant efforts of regional states to identify solutions and formats for managing security and, equally, to arrange security dilemmas generated by the complex topography of threats. The option of regionalization was therefore assumed as a form of extending the self-help paradigm by coordinating the defence efforts of the Central European states with the main objective of preserving the regional status quo. Especially important in this equation was the role played by the great powers, especially France, interested in building a „belt" of allied states as a protection zone against Russia/USSR and preventing a possible Russo-German Entente. The inter-war model of regionalization failed under the pressure of systemic factors, but also of some regional agendas marked by inter-state competition and rivalry. The central element of the regional architecture failure was the lack of firm guarantees of defence from the Western states, which encouraged the regional revisionist hegemonies (Germany and USSR) to implement plans for territorial expansion and subjugation of small states along the Pontic-Baltic area. The hegemonic confrontation for drawing the European systemic order transformed the entire space of Central and Eastern Europe into a major strategic stake, and this has definitively marked the typology of action of the regional players.

After the Second World War, the establishment of the systemic bipolar structure completely annihilated any independent expression of the states located between Germany and Russia through their subordination to the Soviet domination space and their integration into the politico-military structures under the strict control of Moscow. In other words, the historical paradigm of domination of the great powers over the region has been replaced by the imposition of the unique hegemony of the USSR.

The end of the Cold War generated a new security paradigm in the Central European space, drawn around two central events: the unification of Germany and the collapse of the USSR. The emergence of an extended security *vacuum* at the regional level, amid increased state of strategic uncertainty related to the systemic dynamics and the intentions of the great powers, have generated an extensive process of reshaping the regional strategic alignments. In this configuration, the regional states expressed their option for integration into the Euro-Atlantic security structures, carrying out a strategy to align with the US, assuming the Atlanticist orientation as a formula for managing security dilemmas and for assembling the regional strategic setting. In this new configuration, the regionalization as a security solution has been excluded from the calculations of regional states. The main reason was the fear that such a solution could have become a substitute for their integration into the Euro-Atlantic security structures, thus maintaining a „gray" area of security. There were serious concerns in the capitals of Central Europe that they will be left alone to manage their own security space as the conflicts within the regions get a more autonomous character meaning that, with the withdrawal of the hegemon, the regional problems and crises do not automatically translate to the global competition between the two hegemonic poles.

Since the late 2000, a crisis of Atlanticism emerged against the background of the US' decision to review the strategic priorities together with the worsening of the systemic insecurity generated by the Russia's geopolitical return confirmed by its military intervention in Georgia (August 2008). The US disengagement from European affairs through the „Asian pivot" and „reset" with Russia were, in terms of regional states, the beginning of a period of uncertainty induced by the fear of losing the protection of the hegemon. The feeling of vulnerability encouraged the recovery of the regionalization model as a formula for arranging the security realities. The solution of regionalization has not meant a tentative of returning to the logic of the inter-war period. The defining characteristic of the post-2008 regionalization model was that its dynamics occurred within the integrated framework, the alliance with the US and the integration into NATO remaining the central vectors of the organization of regional security.

The systemic crisis caused by Russia's actions of annexing Crimea and destabilizing Ukraine has radically altered the strategic geography of the Central European space. Once with the return to the logic of military threat, a revival of Atlanticism occurred, motivated by the imperative of the US' military engagement and the consolidation of NATO role strengthening as central vectors in ensuring the defence of the eastern border and countering the threat of Russia.

The issue of security regionalization is currently a subject of extensive strategic discussions and debates. We are witnessing, lately, a variety of proposals and initiatives aimed at identifying possible regional security arrangements, either as more extensive formulas (the recovery of the old concept of *Intermarium*) or as more restrained groupings which would act in a variable and complementary geography (the Northern-Baltic group, the Poland-Romania-Ukraine triangle, the Visegrad Group plus Ukraine, Romania-Poland-Turkey, etc.). The aim of these endeavorsis, essentially, the identification and diversification of strategic options which would enable the consolidation of security and defence of the NATO's eastern flank, the most exposed to Russia's geopolitical pressures. For this reason, we consider it important to decipher the dynamics of this process, the constraints and strategic imperatives, the advantages and shortcomings of the implementation of such security solutions.

The novelty of the research lies especially in the proposed approach to the issue of regionalization. In this respect, the design of the research is focused on two central hypotheses of analysis. First, the process of regionalization developed in close interdependence with the Atlanticist dynamic. Therefore, the evolution of America's agenda and its security posture highly impacted upon the typology of behavior of the regional states. Secondly, the development of regional formulas for building security may be an option for managing the strategic uncertainty but it cannot operate unless the Atlanticist orientation is preserved. The alliance with the US is essential in maintaining the coherence of action and preventing the centrifugal tendencies that could create areas of vulnerability within the region. The regionalization is not desirable in terms of hegemonic projection (the protection of the hegemon is sufficient –the case of the maximal Atlanticism) and is not possible in terms of hegemonic confrontation (the bipolarity period). Extending the analysis framework, we show that regionalization is developing under a scenario of minimal Atlanticism. Such a scenario assumes that the position of the West will remain in a state of ambivalence, preferring the option of a compromise between ensuring the Eastern allies and preventing the modification of the strategic status-quo with Russia. In conceptualizing the paradigm of regionalization, it is important to point out that its dynamics is not a natural product derived exclusively from the actions of the states trying to survive in a hostile environment. Regionalization is, by contrast, the result of an interconnection between the security needs of the regional states and the security interests of the great powers. At the Central European level, the dynamics of great power has played a defining role in shaping the regional security alignments and constructs.

Based on these assumptions, the aim of the research is outlined, which is focused on two directions: first, to demonstrate the relevance of the issue of regionalization through the connection

of the regionalization-Atlanticism binomial as a reference point in the enunciation of the proposed framework of analysis; and, secondly, to highlight the importance of applying the assumptions drawn from this analysis in building the security approaches and designing the action strategies at a regional level.

The conceptual-methodological framework of analysis was articulated on three questions: which is the outline of regionalization?, what is the role of the great powers?, and how is regionalization built? To answer these questions, we have integrated the research as part of a theoretical model that combines instruments specific to the two major paradigms, namely the (neo)realism and constructivism. Based on this model, we explain the typology of behaviour of the small state as part of a combination of material factors (systemic structure and dynamics of power distribution within the system) and non-material factors (perceptions of security, historical experiences, lessons learned, type of strategic culture). Within this paradigmatic construction, we show that regionalization is developing in conditions of growing insecurity generated by the onset of a systemic uncertainty and is responding, especially, to stimuli from the major powers/the hegemon. Based on theoretical predictions, we assume that regionalization may be a solution based on two conditions: the existence and preservation of the hegemonic alignment and the existence of a convergence of the regional security agendas. The empirical reality of the dynamics of security in the Central Europe area illustrates the viability of this theoretical model based on the complementarity between the two paradigmatic approaches of the international relations.

As regarding the literature and studies, one could assert that the issue of regionalization has been rather sequentially analysed. There is no ample research approach to address the construction of the regionalization in Central Europe under the systemic changes after 1990. The issue of the security of Central European space was covered as part of systemic relations, US foreign policy, the development of NATO, or NATO/US-Russia relations. The more applied studies were particularly focused on the transition process of former communist countries of Central Europe, the relations between the US and the states from the region, or the Visegrád Group topics. In this context, the usefulness of our research approach is considerable, given that it covers a deficit of analysis by articulating an elaborated approach on the issue of security regionalization by integrating both the analysis of behaviour, the interests of great powers, the systemic imperatives versus regional security imperatives.

Defining Central Europe

The geographical and conceptual framing of Central Europe has been a matter of extensive debate and conceptual construction. Over time, different perspectives have been outlined, by considering either the historical, cultural or geopolitical identity, in trying to explain and understand the significance of the Central European space CE. What is Central Europe? Is it a social construct, a geopolitical space, a political project, an identity aspiration?

In developing our research approach, the central concept employed in defining CE is integrated in geopolitical conceptualization. In this perspective of analysis, the CE represents the territory situated between Germany and Russia which historically represented an area of confrontation between the two regional hegemons. Based on geopolitical delineation, CE covers a geographical area bounded on the North by the Baltic Sea, in the South by the Mediterranean, in the South-East by the Black Sea and the Aegean Sea and in the South-West by the Adriatic Sea. This geographical delineation requires a more nuanced understanding of territorial composition. To clearly define its areal, we will include as parts of the CE six countries: Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Romania and Bulgaria. All six countries are covering the entire strategic area between Germany and Russia which, after 1945, was part of the exterior Soviet Empire. With the integration into the Euro-Atlantic security structures, these states have become the eastern border of NATO/EU and the interface of the West with the „special interests" of Russia. Russia's geopolitical presence was the main vector that influenced the dynamics of these states after 1990. Bulgaria is, however, an exception, being geographically connected to the south, to the Balkans, Greece and Turkey and, consequently, has identified itself less with the space of CE. Bulgaria, however, is an important component of NATO's strategic perimeter, closing virtually its South-eastern flank and at the same time creating a bridge with Turkey and Greece. The CE geographical coverage is also dictated by the strategic-military imperatives of NATO. Poland in the north, together with Romania and Bulgaria in the south are building an important safety belt linking the entire eastern flank from the Baltic to the Black Sea.

I have not included the Balkans area for some reasons, mainly taking into account strategic arguments, specifically their position outside the integrated Euro-Atlantic structures, and also considerations concerning a different political agenda, conflicting security options, a series of complicated internal developments, and so on. The exceptions are Slovenia and Croatia, which are part of the Western alliances' system, but due to their geographical location, are beyond the direct reach of Russia's geopolitical pressure, and so are less connected to the agenda of priorities of CE states. The Baltic countries are a special case. By their geographical location, the natural tendency of these countries is of approaching the Nordic countries, based on an agenda of similar interests and strategic imperatives, built on the main idea of promoting security in the Baltic and preventing

Russia's assertive actions in the region. Due to the location at the northern tip of CE space, and their strategic vulnerability induced by the presence of Russia in the Baltic Sea, these states were less connected to the security issues of the South-eastern flank at the Black Sea. But the Baltic countries are an important component of the CE strategic unity: they provide continuity of NATO's eastern flank and share similar security concerns regarding Russia. In this regard, the prominent role belongs to Poland, a country virtually linking the two ends on the Baltic-Black Sea belt.

Based on the rationale explained above, in this paper we will think of CE as a strategic area that secures the eastern flank of NATO/EU along the Baltic-Black Sea line, but also the central corridor linking Russia and Germany. Due to the increasing unpredictability of the international environment and the deepening of intra-regional faults of dissension, it is not to be excluded the possibility for CE to extend its coverage area in order to more closely connect with the Nordic countries, especially given the important the role of Finland and Sweden.

Thesis structure

The thesis is divided into five chapters, having at their core the dynamics of interconnection between the two main conceptual constructs: regionalization and Atlanticism. During the research, the two processes were analysed according to the development cycles induced by the impact of power shifts and reconfigurations at systemic level. In this respect, there were identified three main stages that are analysed on the basis of chronological delineation. The first corresponds to the period between 1990 and 2008, that saw the birth of Atlanticism as an option for the organization of security in the CE. The second covers the period between 2009 and 2013, being characterized by the advancement of the regionalization agenda as a result of the crisis of Atlanticism that emerged as a consequence of an American withdrawal from Europe. The third stage had its beginning in 2014, and is marked by a revival of the Atlanticism and a reorientation of CE towards the US. Unlike the first phase, currently the reassertion of Atlanticism does not preclude the regionalization solution, but its logic falls into a different register than its traditional dynamics of evolution.

The first chapter provides a theoretical conceptualization of the typology of actions specific for the small state/minor power in the international system and of foundations that motivate its behaviour in the sphere of security. Two questions are particularly relevant in the analysis of small states registry of actions in the context of systemic dynamics: *how are small states trying to maximize their security?* and *what are the foundations on which those security options are built?* To identify possible answers to these questions, the conceptual and methodological framework is

articulated as part of an inclusive and complementary approach built by resorting to two central levels of paradigmatic analysis.

The first level is constructed within the (neo)realist paradigm of analysis. In this context, we assume that the systemic dynamics and proximity of threat are the defining factors that shape the security agendas of small states in the international relations field. Stephen Walt's theory of alliance formation is a central tool of analysis, and using it we tried to understand how a small state builds its strategic alignment as a means of managing its security deficit and imperatives. From the perspective of small states, alliances are an instrument of cardinal importance. In a general perspective, for a small country, the membership in an alliance is designed to compensate the deficit of security and to decrease its strategic vulnerability, thus ensuring its survival and neutralizing potential consequences of systemic balance of power fluctuations. Alliance options of a small state are defined mainly by the security dynamics in the proximate neighborhood, especially if it is located close to one or more great powers with hegemonic aspirations. The perceived threat level correlated with their own power deficit and reduced ability to protect their security interests of small states constrain them to forge alliances with the great powers from the system as a measure to ensure and guarantee survival. The dynamics of alliances in the CE space however reveals a more complex configuration of interests and rationales of regional alignments, meaning that the perception of threat/hostile intent is only one factor in the equation explaining their actions. Preference for a particular alliance is also determined by a rational calculation using the cost-benefit logic, which allows an assessing of opportunities for gain and loss, besides the analysis of major risks and threats. Considering that they are vulnerable to external pressures, lack the capabilities to defend themselves and do not have the ability to make a real contribution to the increasing of power of a defensive coalition, realism assumes that the minor powers will prefer the option of alignment (bandwagoning) instead of balancing. According to the logic of (neo)realist predictions, it is assumed that other possible options, neutrality, „hiding" or other formulas of regional alliance are potentially hazardous strategies that can put small countries in a situation of strategic vulnerability especially in the case of a conflict or accelerated degradation of the balance of power. Another analysis tool used is the theory of hegemonic stability. In this analytic context, the Press-Barnathan thesis brings conceptual innovations concerning how hegemonic power dynamics interacts with the regionalization potential at the level of security. According to the author's argument, the encouragement of regionalization actions by creating mini-alliances/mini-regional blocks, is part of a broader strategy of affirmation and preservation of hegemonic power.

The second level is constructed according to the constructivist theoretical paradigm and assumes that states' behavioral dynamic on the level of security is at the same time influenced by motives of a non-material nature, such as historical experiences, values, beliefs, norms, principles,

ideas of security. Applying these variables in analysis, alliance options of states are responding to more complex motivations that essentially define a certain specific profile of action that is not fundamentally dependent on actual and/or potential trends of systemic configuration. In this context, we used three analytical tools, namely Alexander George's „operational code", Dan Reiter's learning theory and the concept of strategic security culture. According to Alexander George, foreign policy decisions and strategic choices are largely the expression of a behavioural construct formulated by the leader/decisional group, on the basis of subjective factors filtered through the lens of their own beliefs about the nature of conflict and of their own perceptions about others. Learning theory formulated by Reiter advances two central hypotheses of analysis. On the one hand, the individual experiences of a state are a strong determinant in forming its preferences for alliance. On the other hand, alliance choices in the twentieth century were based on the lessons learned as part of the national formative experiences.

As a model of theoretical construction, we believe that systemic dynamics is the one that has a predominant influence in determining the security behavior of states, but the construction of this behavior cannot be dissociated from the way their strategic culture is formulated, which essentially reflects some kind of modification of security thinking based on lessons learned and experiences gained throughout history.

The second chapter deals with the evolution of CE security assembly in the period between 1990 and 2008. The special significance of this stage is given by the assertion of Atlanticism as a fundamental dimension of settling the security architecture of CE. The Atlanticist option was equivalent to a rejection of the regionalization solution, believed to be a potentially generating factor of significant regional turbulence. In the context of systemic development from early '90s, the way of configuring security in CE has been subsumed mainly to the imperative of preserving strategic stability. The central question that has dominated Western strategic thinking was how could have been found a compromise between the need of rearranging the Central European security space, the need to accommodate the interests of Russia and the „fit in" of the united Germany's new status of power. The US agenda concerning the rearrangement of the Central European security space was especially focused on preventing the birth of structural chaos in CE and on taking cautious action in order not to provoke Moscow's hostility and prevent its return to a confrontational policy towards the West. It was especially important to maintain a dialogue with Moscow, in order of achieving the goal of German unification. In this context, the most important regional construct was the creation of the Visegrad Group. Beyond the reasons which led to the efforts of regional states, the formation of the Visegrad Group cannot be dissociated from geopolitical reasons that motivated the direct engagement of Western countries in their support for

the shaping of the new equations of regional cooperation. In this regard, the US has played a significant role aimed at creating a mini-block of countries with pro-Western orientation, which were to support US' efforts of penetrating the strategic perimeter linking the West and the USSR and of balancing the Russian-German "games".

Under the pressure of international dynamics marked by the hesitations of the West regarding the arrangements of security in the CE and by an increase of systemic unpredictability, CE states have asserted their Atlanticist option as the only solution for managing the geography of regional security. After the end of the Cold War, in the strategic calculations of CE states prevailed an approach based on the need to establish close relations with the US, the winning power of the bipolar competition, as a solution for achieving security and managing their defence imperatives. Their relationship with NATO was also perceived in this light, as a means to ensure membership in an alliance that guarantees US involvement in the stability and security of member states. The Eastern expansion of NATO has profoundly altered the strategic map of Europe: on the one hand, the geopolitical exposure zone of CE became part of the most powerful military alliance, thus expanding the umbrella of US security over the entire area from the Baltic to the Black Sea and overcoming the situation of regional security vacuum; on the other hand, the US has succeeded in penetrating the perimeter of projection of power in Eurasia basically defining the parameters of the new international order by asserting the primacy of American power.

The September 11th,2001 terrorist attacks against US generated an activation of pro-US regional agendas. What prevailed in regional calculations was the understanding of the new dynamics of the system who imposed America in the role of the sole hegemon. From this perspective, the American hegemony means that no other state in the system had the capacity to oppose the US power. In other words, the alliance with America is the safest guarantee of security and defence. In the context of the overall security developments induced by the assertion of the American unipolarism, the pro-American option assumed by CE states matched their strategic and opportunity calculations. There were concerns that Washington's turn of attention to the Middle East coupled with the deepening of transatlantic relationship fragmentation and the tendency of the US to use the „coalitions of the willing countries" as a strategy for managing the imperatives of global security, could produce a decoupling of US from Europe and a weakening of the role of NATO as a vehicle of ensuring the collective defence. So, their close alliance with the US was a way to keep it engaged in European security.

The security equation in CE has entered a spiral of regional turmoil after Russia launched its strategy of countering the American geopolitical supremacy. From this perspective, Russia's military intervention in Georgia (August 2008) was a turning point. In terms of new realities induced by Russia's aggressive return as an important player on the continental scene, the

relationship with the US has gained importance in the regional strategic calculations. Moreover, the Atlanticist regional agenda has become a strategic necessity, the only one able to generate credible defense for the CE security.

The third chapter was focused on analyzing the European security dynamics in the period between 2009 and 2013, a phase of major changes that gave new momentum to the geopolitical developments within the CE region. The temporary delimitation corresponds to two processes of systemic impact. The first process refers to the initiation by the US, with the installation of the Obama administration in the White House, in January 2009, of a comprehensive reorientation of its foreign policy agenda leading to progressive reduction of the security commitments in Europe. The new agenda was articulated on two directions: the launch of "reset" with Russia and "Asian pivot", both reflecting a clear trend of American disengagement from Europe and the repositioning of US global strategic posture. The second process has as benchmark the Summit of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), held in Vilnius (November 2013), which triggered a crisis of huge amplitude targeting the existential fundamentals of the systemic post- Cold War order. From this perspective, the year of 2013 represented a concluding stage, which has shaped the security developments after 2009, through the US re-engagement in ensuring European security simultaneously with Russia's return in the logic of hegemonic competition and confrontation.

Within these temporary limits, the regionalization of security agenda in EC has gained increased prominence being assumed as a possible solution of managing the security deficit emerged following the US's military withdrawal and growing unpredictability of Russia's geopolitical behavior. In developing our research, we proceed from three assumptions that define the systemic framework in which the regionalization process has evolved between 2009 and 2013.

Assumption 1. The US decision to "reset" the relations with Russia and the re-orientation of its focus towards Asia-Pacific region generated a major paradigm shift. This had two major implications: the gradual withdrawal away from Europe and the review of the strategic posture in Europe by giving up its unipolar hegemonic posture. The American withdrawal from the Continental security affairs has generated a feeling of strategic insecurity in CE induced by the fear of losing the protection of the hegemon (fear of abandonment) and the re-emergence of great power geopolitical "plays" (preference for systemic agreements in the detriment of the interests of the CE small allies). The Atlanticist crisis led to the emergence of a feeling of insecurity and activated the regional efforts to identify strategies to compensate the state of regional vulnerability.

*Assumption 2.*The US disengagement from Europe reactivated the power "games" in Europe especially obvious on Berlin-Moscow direction. Two aspects were especially important: on one hand, Germany's paradigm of action closely linked to the West-German Ostpolitik line,

traditionally associated with a preference towards an accommodation policy with Russia, and, on the other hand, the speeding up of Russia's efforts of redesigning the parameters of the continental order by building special relations with Germany and pushing for US's exclusion from the European affairs. The dynamic of these two coordinates was a key vector in shaping the overall configuration of security regionalization in EC.

*Assumption 3.*In the context of US disengagement, NATO has faced with gradual decrease in its strategic relevance, bringing into discussion its capacity of fulfilling the defense commitments towards its allies. In the regional perspective, NATO capacity, as a vehicle of guaranteeing defense and protection, was losing grounds while the international scene was entering a period of major systemic challenges. There is no less true that the CE states did not abandon the objective of stopping the American withdrawal and to keep the special security links with SUA/NATO as the main regional security guarantee, but, nevertheless, the Atlanticist agenda entered into a strategic logic of uncertainty and mistrust. For the CE states, the new strategic approach adopted by the US generated two major risks: the accommodation tendency towards Russia and the possible abandonment of the regional allies. Both hypothesis were seen as generating profound changes in the strategic topography of the Pontic-Baltic area putting the entire eastern flank in a position of strategic vulnerability to Russia. Together, these fears have led to a severe crisis of the Atlanticist orientation at the regional level.

The fourth chapter deals with the development of regionalization process in EC in the period 2009-2013. In this regard, we consider that the regionalization represented an ample process of reshaping the security geography as a strategy of countering the systemic unpredictability induced by the US withdrawal, Russia's geopolitical advance in the former Soviet space and the rise of Germany as the hegemonic power of Europe together with the revival of the "power games" on Berlin-Moscow axis. The evolution and the dynamics of regionalization process was outlined starting by 2008-2009 against the background of the growing Atlanticist crisis and the emergence of a feeling of insecurity regarding US/NATO reliability of defending the Eastern allies. In fact, the regionalization signaled a reorientation trend from prioritizing the security relationship with the US towards a greater diversification of the strategic options so that to prevent a potential regional security "vacuum" let by NATO's decrease in relevance. Between 2010 and 2013, when the EaP summit in Vilnius was held, the regionalization process had rapid evolution. The analytical approach was shaped on two assumptions.

Assumption 1. The Dynamic of the regionalization process in EC followed three coordinates: the speeding up of the efforts aiming at setting a common regional front as a formula to prevent and manage a potential security "vacuum" that could emerge in the region; the "pivot" to

Germany as a strategy of engaging Berlin to assume a prominent role on the security and defense dimension; intensifying efforts in order to align Ukraine to the West by signing the Association Agreement with the EU, thus ensuring a "buffer" zone between the eastern flank of NATO / EU and Russia.

Assumption 2. As regards the regionalization efforts, the role played by Poland became a central vector in pushing the regional agenda of action and forging a new strategic reality in the EC based on twofold objectives: to soften up the Russian-German accommodation tendencies and to neutralize the potential consequences of the US military withdrawal. Polish strategy pursued two directions: to adapt itself to the post- "reset" realities, by launching its own "reset" with Russia and rapprochement with Germany, and by boosting the regional security cooperation by building multi-directional regional axis, as an additional tool of strategic insurance.

In the overall construction of the regionalization process, Poland was the main catalyst which have significantly changed the equation of regional alignments. The decision-makers in Warsaw based their calculus on three assumptions: EC was no longer a priority for the US; Germany has gained prominence in drawing the new regional security paradigm; Russia has not given up its revisionist agenda. Poland's actions developed on two major coordinates. The first one aimed at helping the regional states to build a platform of political and military cooperation as to generate a greater harmonization of the regional agendas of action and to strengthen their contribution in managing the regional security. The second coordinate focused on enhancing Germany's engagement in developing the European defense and security policy and, especially important, to increase its involvement in shaping the Eastern neighborhood.

The architecture of regionalization in EC was especially grounded in the new dynamic of cooperation within the Visegrad Group (V4) and its reactivation as an important player in the regional security. The efforts of enhancing the V4 revealed a growing level of Poland's ambition with the aim of establishing a distinct grouping, shaped as a mini-regional alliance able to generate defense potential and get a greater influence over the decision making process in Brussels on issues related to security and defense. In this way, it could also gain more influence in Berlin and force it to take into consideration the interests of the regional states and, equally important, to provide a more credible tool of deterring Russia's assertive actions. The military cooperation within the Visegrad Group was the nucleus of a much wider agenda intended by Warsaw focused on consolidating the entire Eastern flank on a double axis: north-south and east-west.

An important factor in the dynamics of regionalization in EC was the rise of German power that occurred amid US withdrawal and the deepening of the European economic crisis. The shift of the European balance of power in Germany's advantage caused a reorientation of the regional agenda and security priorities towards Berlin. The rationales can be detected on two dimensions of

analysis. First, Germany has acquired a central role in managing the European security dossiers. These concerned both the relationship with Russia and forging stability in the former Soviet space as well as energy security issue. Germany had the necessary means, through its special economic relations with Moscow to ensure a protection "barrier" against Russia's assertiveness or to appease its geopolitical ambitions. At the same time, Berlin had the necessary political influence and financial resources to support a pro-active policy on the eastern neighborhood.

Another important direction of action as regards the regionalization process in CE targeted the Eastern neighborhood. The core element was the agenda projected by Poland having as the main goal to connect Ukraine with the West and reduce Russia's influence in the region. The most important regional initiative in this direction was the launch of the Eastern Partnership (EaP). Advancing EaP project has revived the geopolitical competition between the West and Russia for gaining preeminence in the former Soviet space. The risk of "losing" Ukraine and the potential penetration of the West towards its strategic perimeter triggered the Russian counter-reaction which resulted in the deepest security crisis of the post-bipolar era.

The fifth chapter addresses the way in which the regionalization agenda was shaped against the background of the greatest systemic changes generated by the return in the logic of confrontation and geopolitical competition following Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula. Within this new power relations configuration, the EC has become a major geopolitical stake in articulating the organizational parameters of the new European security order. Facing the new systemic realities, the EC witnessed a Atlanticist return shaped along the growing demarches aiming at consolidating the American military presence and reviving NATO role as the only credible options to guarantee the defense of the regional status-quo and to counter Russia's revisionist offensive. Within these limits, we integrate the dynamic of the regionalization process as a possible solution to allow the CE states to project a new security geography at the Eastern border.

In analyzing the impact of the new security dynamics over the CE configuration, we started from three assumptions:

Assumption 1. The aggressive annexation of the Crimean peninsula together with the increasing military power projection along NATO Eastern borders and the launching of a global revisionist agenda projected Russia as a major threat against the CE territorial status-quo.

Assumption 2. The return to the logic of military threat generated a Atlanticism revival motivated by the imperative of US military engagement and the need for the consolidation of NATO posture as key vectors of ensuring the defense of the Eastern border and deterring the Russian threat. The regional Atlanticist agenda aimed primarily to recalibrate the US military

presence as to enable a broader process of "re-pivoting" towards Eastern Europe and of increasing NATO defense capabilities along the entire Pontic-Baltic belt.

Assumption 3. The increased systemic uncertainties, the emergence of some fault lines within the Western solidarity and the lack of strategic coherence of the regional agendas, generated new realignments within the CE having as the main goal to provide a strategic platform of action of the regional countries based on a diverse geography of security imperatives and priorities. The US role is essential in the overall build-up of cooperative alignments as a measure to strengthen the security posture of NATO's Eastern flank.

The Atlanticism revival was articulated on two directions: military engagement of the US and a consolidated NATO presence on the Eastern flank. From the perspective of regional states, the "Asian pivot" and the US tendency to reduce its involvement in the European security affairs had an important role in encouraging Russia's assertive actions. The solution for countering the Russian threat required, from this perspective, a new "pivot" of the US towards Eastern Europe.

The return of the Atlantsicist paradigm was not a uniform process as its dynamics revealed a lack of solidarity, different approaches and conflicting security visions within the CE region. The motivations of these fracturing lines can be explained both by geopolitical reasons, namely the level of vulnerability felt by each regional player given its geographic position towards Russia, and by pragmatic considerations related to the economic interests of the regional states (economic dependence on Russia), domestic political ambitions, ideological motivations, strategic and opportunistic political calculations. From this perspective, we can distinguish two groups of states. The group of states that included Poland and Romania together with the Baltic countries opted for a maximal Atlanticist agenda which was articulated under the assumption that Russia, by using military force in Ukraine and occupying the Crimea Peninsula, has become an existential threat to European security. Therefore, it was necessary to build a credible deterrent against Russia through permanent stationing of allied military troops and a consolidated military infrastructure in CE, as well as securing a strong US presence as key element for a credible allied defense posture. The second group- consisting of Hungary, Slovakia and Bulgaria- has opted for a moderate Atlanticist agenda that essentially supported the idea of taking measure to pressure Russia to change its behavior, but it called for restraint to avoid further tensions with it and to keep open the dialogue with Moscow as a solution to manage the regional crisis.

The lack of solidarity and the uncertainty regarding the allied ability to act together with Russia's increasing military pressures along the entire Eastern flank and the deepening of the fault lines between the regional states, have encouraged the states located in the close proximity of the crisis to seek for further diversification of their strategic priorities.

Two dynamics are particularly relevant. First, it was the reorientation of the regional states towards the traditional concept of territorial defense focused on building a stronger national deterrent potential. This trend was evident in Poland. The second dynamic had in view the shaping of various formula of regional alignment which revealed the tendencies of the regional states to formulate their security agenda according to specific preferences and security interests. In this regards, we may include the followings: the reassessing of the role of V4, the creation of Slavkov Group or initiation of Craiova Group. At the same time, new proposals of shaping the regional security architecture emerged at the level of strategic debates either by re-viewing the old concept of *Intermarium* or through building new regional groupings to cover the eastern flank in a variable and complementary geography.

Conclusions:

Starting by 2014, Russia's return as a major threat against continental security due to its aggressive action against Crimea and the destabilization of Ukraine underpinned a paradigm shift in terms of building security in the CE region. The core element of this reconfiguration it was the revival of the Atlanticist course that targeted an ample US "re-pivot" towards Europe and the reassessment of NATO military strategies to defend the Eastern flank.

The regionalization as a possible solution did not lose its relevance amid the return in the Atlanticist paradigm. The emergence of fault lines within the West, as well as within the CE region, against the background of growing strategic unpredictability and the rise of Russian threat, requires a diversification of the strategic options. In this regard, the development of mini-alliances among the countries located in the most geopolitical vulnerable area along the Baltic-Black Sea axis, might provide an efficient solution based on a twofold objective: on one hand, to strengthen the coherence of action among the regional countries, especially important as regards the security agenda towards Russia, and, on the other hand, to increase defense capacity on NATO Eastern border.

Nevertheless, in such a configuration, the vital condition to advance the regionalization agenda is to keep it closely connected to the alliance with the US based on US/NATO credible military presence along the entire Eastern flank.

Regionalization as a solution for managing the strategic uncertainty, can operate successfully only within a Atlanticist paradigm. Therefore, the alliance with the US and NATO alignment, thus the Euro-Atlantic integrated framework, constitutes the only viable solution to ensure the security and defence in Central Europe.

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