

Do Ostriches Live in Central Europe? Normalizing the Russian Attack on Ukraine in the Visegrád Four

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Abstract: The study surveys instances of discursive normalization of the Russian attack on Ukraine across the Visegrád Four (V4) countries, examining political discourses in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. Following February 24, 2022, the strategies that expressed an open backing of Russia were mostly marginalized becoming morally all but impossible and thus politically too costly. However, other and more indirect ways of showing “understanding” if not support for Moscow’s actions soon (re)emerged. These included presenting the war in “realist-geopolitical” terms, as a proxy for the (allegedly inevitable) competition between great powers and a “neutralist-pacifist” discourse that criticized the Western military aid to Ukraine. In a broader sense, both discourses can be viewed as anchored in collective memories of the tragic Central European past that have traditionally infused the national identities in the V4 with a sense of vulnerability. The grim “realist” image of the world also rhymes well with the regional rise of the populist political style that hinges on the stated need to protect the “underdog” people and replaces the imperatives of solidarity with those of “self-help.”

Keywords: geopolitics, Russia, Ukraine, Visegrád Four, war

In terms of studying discursive normalization of the Russo-Ukrainian war the Visegrád Four (V4) present us with a stimulating case for regional comparisons. On the one hand, there are obvious intra-regional differences that are rooted in specific identity legacies and the resulting strategic cultures, which can come into a sharp clash, as they did for example in the case of the public Polish-Hungarian split over the 2022 invasion. Against this background, however, there are also telling points of convergence that arguably have to do with the structural position of the V4 in the European international order and the related historical experience. The latter can be narrated as something that, in the words, of the Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán constitutes a “Central European fate” understood as “a history of suffering” (Government 2015) or – if put in more analytical terms – as similar collective memories of foreign domination, victimization, and of “smallness” understood as existential vulnerability of the nation.

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Logically, this “Central European fate” breeds a feeling of empathy solidarity and commitment to aiding a country that is suffering from an attack by the more powerful imperialistic neighbour. However, the political narration is less straightforward and similar collective notions can also underpin a normalizing or “neutralist” discourse, albeit this neutralism has a pedigree that is very different from the neutralist stances to be found among distant powers like Brazil (see Tabosa 2023, contribution to this forum).

Indeed, it is part of a *realpolitik* approach grounded in a grim image of world politics that leaves little room for justice or solidarity. It thus normalizes the 2022 aggression through its *geopoliticization* and relativization. *Inter alia* such discourses are also likely to resonate very well with “vernacular” or *popular geopolitics* that is spiced up with or directly bordering on conspiracy theories (see Makarychev 2023b and Kurnyshova 2023, contributions to this forum). With respect to the latter, the V4 has certainly experienced no shortage.

The attitudes towards Russia and Russian policy have always varied across the V4, and successful regional cooperation often hinged on bracketing the issue. As a grouping, the V4 (known as the V3 prior to the Czecho-Slovak “velvet divorce”) was initially conceived with the aim of securing the post-Communist nations’ accession to the Western institutions, which was narrativized as Central Europe’s “return to the West” from the “Eastern” (read Russian) captivity. At the same time, some of the V4 countries harboured powerful non/anti-Western identity legacies that seemed to point in a rather different direction. Thus, in the Slovak case, this would be the historically anchored tradition of pan-Slavism. In the 21st century, this tradition would continue to provide the ideological resources for cultural and political Russophilia and anti-Western and pro-Kremlin narrative promotion (see Golianová and Kazharski 2020). Here, in a partial similarity to the postcolonial countries (see Dharmaputra 2023, contribution to this forum), the normalizing discourses could tap into the history of an uneasy relationship with the West.

In the case of Hungary, the national myth of the Christian bulwark of Europe has curiously co-existed with an intellectual tradition of Turanist Eurasianism (see Balogh 2022) and – starting from a certain point in time – also with Viktor Orbán’s new geopolitical imaginary of the “Eastern opening.” This imaginary combined references to the non-European heritage of the Hungarians with sympathies towards Eurasian authoritarians. And even in the Czech Republic, where no such cultural tradition had existed, paradoxically, political leaders who oversaw the proverbial return of their country to the West could, at the same time, reproduce significant parts of the Kremlin narrative on Ukraine. Thus, for example, a 2014 paper published by the institute of the Euroskeptic former president Václav Klaus tellingly describes the events in Ukraine as “a non-constitutional coup” and justifies separatism by arguing that, historically speaking, many modern states were created in breach of the contemporary legal orders (Klaus and Weigl 2014).

In this respect, the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine reshuffled the rhetorical cards in the V4. On the one hand, the shocking scale of the events significantly narrowed down the room for ambiguity, making it politically more costly to embrace elements of the Kremlin

narrative. Russian “hybrid” involvement through proxies previously created discursive opportunities for employing categories such as the “Ukraine crisis” or “civil war in Ukraine.” Now this “hybrid” involvement was substituted by an act of open uncamouflaged aggression. Yet, at the same time, this new reality also created additional ambiguities and gray zones in which various species of *Putinverstehers* discourse could continue to thrive. And whilst some of the former Kremlin sympathizers like the Czech President Miloš Zeman made a U-turn by acknowledging their mistake and calling for tough sanctions (Kottová 2022), others would opt for a more ambiguous approach.

Following February 24, 2022, openly defending Moscow’s actions became politically too toxic for all but the very fringe political players. Consequently, many of those who had previously espoused a sympathetic stance towards Russia, such as Klaus or Orbán, made a point of condemning the aggression, and adopted a “pacifist” stance, calling for “immediate ceasefire” (Government 2022a). This applies to many Russia-sympathizers with some notable exceptions like the Slovak populist and unsuccessful presidential candidate Štefan Harabin, who continued to insist that “he would do the same as Putin to Ukraine because it was Russia’s duty to pacify the Nazis who murdered fifteen thousand of their own civilians since 2014” (Cuprik 2022). Tellingly, many of those who, like Harabin or the vice-president of SMER-SD Ľuboš Blaha, adopted the pro-Kremlin narrative prior to February 24, blamed the mounting tensions on the West and promised that Russia “would never attack Ukraine,” also had their moment of “radio silence” following the invasion. Apparently, they were in need of rethinking their discursive strategies in the new political reality.

These strategies could be roughly divided into those that contribute to indirectly strengthening the Russian narration of the events and those that perform some mode of normalization by relativizing and naturalizing the war.

One indirect strategy is undermining the integrity of the Western narrative by questioning its factological pivots. Thus, in Poland, where an openly pro-Russian position was considered to be exotic even prior to the 2022 war, Janusz Korwin-Mikke, leader of the right-wing libertarian Konfederacja, came forward to point out “inconsistencies” in the Ukrainian account of the Bucha Massacre (Olejarczyk 2022). On February 24, Konfederacja issued a statement that condemned the Russian aggression as an act of “international gangsterism” (Janusz Jaskółka 2022). However, Korwin-Mikke had been long known for his statements favouring Moscow’s stance, such as when he claimed that annexing Crimea was “completely natural” (2014).

Other indirect strategies could be tentatively identified as *victimblaming* and *Westblaming* (or *whataboutism*). Thus, Václav Klaus in the Czech Republic, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and, previously, also Robert Fico in Slovakia, each in his own manner, laid blame on Ukraine for not fulfilling the Minsk Agreements signed in 2014–2015 and suggested shared responsibility for the war (Government 2022b; Klaus 2022; Stanovská 2022;). Additionally, Robert Fico and his party SMER-SD immediately blamed the US for giving Russia many lessons in violating international law, e.g., by intervening in Yugoslavia and

Iraq, with Moscow merely being “a good pupil” of the West (TASR 2022). The SMER-SD’s chief philosopher and a self-proclaimed leftist Luboš Blaha had long been an ardent fan of the global “anti-hegemonic epistemologies” (see Hosaka 2023, contribution to this forum) that he constantly used to attack US foreign policy.

This last point pertains to the more direct strategy of naturalizing the Russian aggression by framing the situation in terms of the IR realist commentary or the tradition of classical geopolitics and by presenting it as being a mere proxy for great power rivalry, or as Robert Fico put it, “a purely Russian-American matter.” Thus, Václav Klaus (2022) insisted on “re-framing the debate about Ukraine” by highlighting “the push for American domination in Europe and North-West and Central Asia, which almost a century-old theory of Halford Mackinder calls ‘the Heartland?’ When will we finally be allowed to say something about America and its intentions and outcomes, in particular, the consequences of various colour revolutions?” questioned the former Czech president.

In Hungary, Prime Minister Orbán publicly made a number of similar framings. For example, his suggestion that had the US been part of the Minsk Agreements, it would be able “to force Ukraine to do what it agreed to” implied a great power management view of the world, denying agency to smaller states. Orbán’s appreciation for the “traditional” wisdom of great power politics is clearly visible in this comment:

“The Russians are speaking an old language. So, when we listen to them, it is as if we are hearing the sounds of the past: the system of gestures, the categories, the words. When I listen to Mr. Lavrov, it is like what we heard thirty or forty years ago. But this does not mean that what they are saying does not make sense: it does make sense, and it is worth taking seriously.”
(Government 2022b)

Much of this reasoning gets its inspiration from or, at least, intellectually overlaps with the policy wisdom of those Western commentators who work in the tradition of structural neorealism, e.g., John Mearsheimer who has become (in)famous for explaining the Russian–Ukrainian conflicts with the alleged Western overstretch into Russia’s zone of existential interest. This “structuralist” line of reasoning frames the aggression as an inevitable or “automatic” response, while simply ignoring – or “black-boxing” – its domestic roots such as the regime type and the imperialist and anti-Western articulations of Russian identity (see Kazharski 2022 for a somewhat more detailed discussion). Notably, in November 2022, Orbán even received Mearsheimer in the Carmelite Monastery in Buda for an informal discussion of the ongoing war (MTI 2022). The meeting took place in a room next to a bookshelf and a giant globe which was probably meant to visualize the significance of “geopolitics” as a “serious objective science.”

Understood from a critical perspective, this recasting of the aggression against Ukraine as part of a global great power competition performs several related functions. Those include decentering and trivializing the issue, but also absolving the aggressor of at least part of

his responsibility as well as normalizing and naturalizing the aggression through a realist image of world politics. In that image, inevitably, “all powers do it.” As the vice-president of Slovakia’s SMER-SD Ľuboš Blaha put it, for example, when questioned whether the Ukrainians should not have the freedom of choice, “we have certain geopolitical constants here (*geopolitické konštanty*) that we cannot change just because we do not like them. Same as we do not have to like what America is doing to Cuba, which it has in geographical proximity” (Cuprik 2022).

Notably, adopting this reifying approach does not only involve buying into the Kremlin-promoted reasoning about Russia’s alleged security concerns. It can also include distorting the factual truth, as when Viktor Orbán explains the origins of the war:

“How did the war come about? We’re caught in the crossfire between major geopolitical players: NATO has been expanding eastwards, and Russia has become less and less comfortable with that. The Russians made two demands: that Ukraine declare its neutrality, and that NATO would not admit Ukraine. These security guarantees weren’t given to the Russians, so they decided to take them by force of arms. This is the geopolitical significance of this war.” (Government 2022c)

In fact, the demands that Russia famously published in December 2021 stretched far beyond Ukraine. Thus, Article 4 of the draft of the Treaty on security guarantee between Russia and the United States obliged the US “to prevent further eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and deny accession to the Alliance to the States of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics” (The Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2021a). Furthermore, Article 6 of a similar Russia–NATO treaty draft published on the same day, forbade “any further enlargement of NATO,” whilst Article 4 banned the pre-1997 NATO members from deploying “military forces and weaponry on the territory of any of the other States in Europe in addition to the forces stationed on that territory as of 27 May 1997” (The Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2021b).

Obviously, the demands directly interfered with the sovereign rights of the new NATO members including the V4 countries, to host allied forces on their territory. Orbán’s explanation of the war as stemming from unfulfilled demands on Ukraine thus clearly involves a bit of an ostrich policy with respect to Russia’s claims on the entirety of the Central and Eastern European region – Hungary included. However, this ostrich policy also rhymed rather well with the “pacifist” (“there can be no military solution to the conflict;” “Russia will inevitably prevail”) and “neutralist” (“this is not our war”) stance.

Naturally, in terms of the practical policy implications, this parochial, myopic *realpolitik* reasoning which incorporates elements of the Moscow narrative, is part and parcel of the geopolitical opportunism style which the Hungarian government has practiced in recent years. This style has brought its foreign policy closer to the *modus operandi* of post-Soviet

autocrats like Aliaksandr Lukashenka who, prior to 2020, had also actively engaged in the game of balancing.

Obviously, the realist-geopolitical image of international politics, with all its implications for interpreting the Russo-Ukrainian war, is not endemic to Hungary. As such the grim image of IR as a dangerous and selfish game is an excellent match to the right-wing populist style of politicians in the entire V4 and beyond, who frame themselves as the exclusive champions of the “underdog” peoples needing protection from multiple enemies (see, for example, Cadier and Szulecki’s 2020 analysis of Poland). As Harold James (2022) put it, geopolitics is “an attempt to understand the world by people and countries that believe they are losing out.”

Finally, this brings us back to the similarities shared by Central European national identities and the collective memories that underpin them. The geopoliticized image of the world rhymes very well not only with populist anti-establishment politics but also with the renarrated “history of suffering” that Central Europe’s chief ideologist of illiberalism is keen to talk about. Indeed, collective memories of national tragedies and an ingrained sense of existential vulnerability and “smallness” can be a powerful stimulus of solidarity with the victim of an imperialist aggression. Yet, under other circumstances, they also have a chance of reinforcing those images of international politics that are rather conducive of the aggressor’s narrative.

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