



Europe Moving Eastward? The Changing Dynamics in the EU and NATO Following the War in Ukraine

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Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 significantly changed one of the most important dynamics with the EU and NATO. Until then, policy toward Russia had been a fraught issue between the older Western European members and the more recent members from Central and Eastern Europe. While the former had prioritized economic relations, the latter had generally warned about the continued danger of Russian aggression. This debate had continued even after Russia's first attacks on Ukraine in 2014. Since 2022, however, Europeans have finally acted in support of Ukraine, enacting several packages of economic sanctions. The Russia hawks saw their position vindicated, while the old Western power couple, France and Germany, have had to adjust theirs. This article examines this story of shifting power balances within the EU and NATO, applying a conceptual framework emphasizing political practice and persuasive ideas. It shows how the war has shifted the center of gravity in both organizations somewhat to the East, as Central and Eastern European countries speak with increased weight. However, the pendulum may well swing back soon, as most of these countries will find it hard broadening their policy agendas sufficiently to other issues. But most of all, several of the Central and East European countries may themselves be abandoning their old positions at the very moment they have won the debate over Europe's Russia policy.

Keywords: *European Union; NATO; Russia's war on Ukraine; agenda setting; Central and Eastern European countries*

Introduction

Few topics have been as fraught inside the Euro-Atlantic organizations as relations with Russia have. A clear fault line inside the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) divided those seeking closer, economically beneficial relations with Russia and those seeking to securitize relations. Although the Central and East European (CEE) countries that joined both organization in the years

1999–2007 were never a fully coherent bloc on this issue, most took a far more skeptical view of Russia than did leading Western countries like France, Germany, and Italy. Whereas many of the CEE countries were cautious in the dealings with Russia, scarred by their recent involuntary and painful association with it, many in the West were more than willing to bury the Cold War hatchet and focus on commercial opportunities. They saw the CEE countries' insistence on securitizing relations as a distraction, and one that fundamentally misunderstood the new political and economic "reality" where interdependence was the way to stabilize relations. This debate continued even after Russia first attacked Ukraine in 2014 and illegally annexed Crimea.

It was not until Russia launched its full-scale invasion in February 2022 that Western states were forced to thoroughly reassess their past policies. For the CEE, the drastic Russian escalation provided a major "we-told-you-so" moment, and allowed them—finally, through their example, practice, and compelling arguments—to assume the role of agenda-setters in the Euro-Atlantic organizations. As German Chancellor Olaf Scholz put it, "the center of Europe [was] moving eastwards."¹ Or was it? This article charts the debates over the EU and NATO policies toward Russia and the growing influence of the CEE "Russia hawks"—those favoring a hard line against Russia—as agenda-setters once full-scale war was underway. Yet, it also questions whether this will merely be a fleeting moment or if the CEE countries' newfound influence will be of lasting significance. In the following, we will first look at some of the factors that make for influence in the decision-making and policymaking of multilateral organizations. We will then briefly consider the overall experience of the CEE countries during their years of membership and their capacity as agenda-setters on relations with Russia. Lastly, we turn to the impact of the February 2022 full-scale invasion and how it shook up the existing balances of opinion. Finally, we will consider the possibility of old patterns reasserting themselves.

Influence in Euro-Atlantic Organizations

What is power and influence between allies, joined together in a multilateral setting? One can look for instances of "A making B do something B would not otherwise have done," or states casting vetoes and blocking decisions, as one can leverage such actions. A more constructive take requires more nuance. Helen Wallace synthesized several aspects of state influence in the EU into an analytical framework, much of which can also be carried over to the NATO setting, and which forms the basis for the subsequent analysis.² The foremost factor is, naturally, presence, "having a seat at the table" as the cliché goes. Effectiveness, Wallace argued, can be tracked through several other factors: political and economic weight; political, social, and economic practice; persuasive ideas and compelling demands; and lastly credibility and consistency.

A country's political weight can be measured quantitatively. The "lump concept" of power, favored by structural realists, seeks to quantify resources and assets. Kenneth Waltz listed territory, population, natural resources, economic strength, and military capability, with political stability and competence as additional factors.³ Political economists, both of the realist and neoliberal persuasion, have argued that although military power is a constant, economics need more consideration, both as a determining factor in state interests and actions, but also as a tool of power in itself.⁴ Another aspect may be a country's historical role at critical junctures of the organization's history. In addition to sheer economic weight, one may add more indirect aspects, such as net contributions to the common budget and the country's centrality in intra-EU trade.

Political practice is a more intangible element of influence but essentially draws on what Joseph Nye called *soft power*: the ability to shape preference and "get others to want the same as you want, without payment or coercion."⁵ Such power can be accrued through a country's culture, political values, or policies; essentially through attention to one's brand and image, coupled with consistent practice. Winning others to one's side through attraction and persuasion may somewhat compensate for material shortcomings; by the same token, a country with repellent political values and practices may find it hard, or at least expensive, to make its material resources count. Inside an organization members must be good at finding common ground, striking up alliances with others, and building a reputation for being constructive. Social and economic practice functions similarly: a smaller country with a good track record for domestic economic management and social progress may well speak with greater weight than a nominally larger country that struggles or has acquired a reputation for incompetence.

Bachrach and Baratz called agenda-setting and framing of issues the "second face of power."⁶ Indeed, one can acquire significant agenda-setting power by putting forward persuasive ideas for the future development of integration. This requires the ability to think beyond narrow interests to build a coalition, to convince others of the desirable direction of future development, and to show that policies can be good for the organization as a whole. Making compelling demands can work similarly, if one can successfully draw attention to certain problems, yet, on occasion, may also burn through one's credit with the other members. Finally, Wallace argued that credibility and consistency are prime currencies for member states wishing to influence events. A state needs a reputation for trustworthiness, for following through on one's commitments. Squandering or never acquiring such a reputation will make the country less effective in the next negotiation.

In NATO, sheer weight explains the centrality of the United States. Spending more on the military than the other alliance members combined, its leadership role is unquestioned, even when the political commitment voiced in Washington is questionable.⁷ However, one also sees the other nuclear powers (France and the United Kingdom) assume prominent positions, as does a regional power like Turkey. Even smaller countries, like Belgium and the Netherlands, have played prominent roles,

having supplied two and four Secretary Generals, respectively. Other countries also enhanced their reputations through commitment to joint operations, such as ISAF in Afghanistan. Still others raised their standing by excelling in niche capacities, for example, in the cyber or energy domains, and have raised their standing that way. Smaller states' narrower range of core interests allow them to focus on a few key issues, while they tend to be more nimble than larger ones and thus better able to adapt to changing circumstances.⁸

In the EU, political and economic weight explains the centrality of the Franco-German axis, these two being the largest countries by all quantitative measures. Yet, they also play the central roles in the EU's founding myth of overcoming war and nationalism, and uniting in peaceful integration.⁹ Moreover, both have worked tirelessly at establishing themselves as players in Brussels and at integrating the EU into national policymaking and even into their national political identities. The United Kingdom, by contrast, never managed to properly adjust during its forty-six years of membership. Although Britain's implementation record was one of the best, its pre-Brexit economic performance was reasonably successful, and its net contributions to the EU's budgets were significant, it was often marginalized in Brussels. Despite putting forward the original ideas for the Single Market, and having championed the eastward enlargement of 2004, the United Kingdom had a reputation for being difficult and unconstructive.¹⁰

Smaller states have also been able to play the game well, even when their size could count against them in terms of Council voting weights, European Parliament delegation size, and so on. This is not primarily through veto threats, which are a blunt instrument that can easily cause political blowback. Instead, influence can be sought through strategies of prioritized key issues and diligent coalition building.¹¹ Generally, smaller states' strategies do not differ much from larger ones', especially the longer a state has been a member. Competence and expertise are the primary currencies for all states, big or small. Indeed, "size is what states make of it."¹² Moreover, a well-prepared and focused council presidency can allow even the newest and smallest member states a significant amount of agenda-setting power.¹³

As noted above, Belgium and the Netherlands have held senior positions in NATO; in the EU too, along with Luxembourg, they have held a disproportionate share of the top jobs. Belgium and the Netherlands leveraged their central positions into significant influence on the creation of the Economic and Monetary Union in the 1990s.¹⁴ The Netherlands, together with Austria, became influential during the Eurozone crisis of 2010–2012: They could both point to their own stellar record on budgets and public debt, as they took hardline positions on bailing out those with lesser records. Being the biggest net contributor on a per capita basis adds to the Netherlands' relative weight. These countries have also frequently been pushing for deeper integration during treaty negotiations, shaping the debate on next steps. The Nordic countries, for their part, have been influential in spurring the development of EU environmental and climate policies, having particularly strong domestic track

records to showcase.¹⁵ By contrast, Greece has often made headlines for the wrong reasons, not least during the financial crisis, that it rarely exerts great influence through example and persuasion. Yet, its more recent performance, if sustained, could possibly recast its image with its partners. In the next section, we will turn to how the CEEs integrated into the EU and NATO.

The Newcomers in Brussels

“It is not really responsible behavior. It is not well brought-up behavior. They missed a good opportunity to keep quiet.” Thus spoke French president Jacques Chirac on 18 February 2003 after a meeting of the European Council, commenting on a number of CEE countries, who had deigned to defy the French position and express support for the United States in the run-up to the Iraq invasion. “Not very well behaved,” “reckless,” “frivolous,” “infantile,” continued the French president. Drawing a distinction between the French position and that of the Poles, Hungarians, and Czechs, Chirac stated, “When you are in the family you have more rights.”¹⁶

With the benefit of hindsight, one may think Chirac had a point in opposing the Iraq War. Yet his statement also epitomized the condescending and overbearing manner in which many CEE countries felt treated after joining the EU and NATO. For several years after their entry, a feeling persisted that these countries were somehow second-class members and should take their lead from the older, wiser Western European countries (and the United States).

Enlargement with many new members in a short time-space—by 2025 NATO had grown to 32 members and the EU to 27—rarely goes without noise, as newcomers learn the ropes, and try to adjust to the institutional norms and procedures. Yet, it is striking how long the perceived settling in took, or, perhaps, how long it took for the Western countries to fully accept the 2000s intake as equals. More than twenty years after the CEE countries’ accession, references to the “new” or “newer” member states remain frequent. Nothing like it was the case with Austria, Finland, and Sweden, which joined in 1995. Nine years, apparently, is the difference between “new” and “established.”

Some early day incidents certainly left a bad taste. Poland quarreling with Germany over World War II reparations, and arguing in 2007 that their wartime dead ought to be counted toward their Council voting weight and parliamentary representation, was a case in point.¹⁷ Such behavior tended to overshadow the legitimate claim for greater Western recognition of the traumatic impact and legacy of socialism on the CEE. Integrating this history into the prevailing Western-centric narrative of European integration was not simple.¹⁸

The significant socio-economic and institutional gaps between the former socialist countries and their new Western European partners mattered in terms of implementing and enforcing new rules or entrenching democratic values.¹⁹ Problems with corruption and the rule of law still plagues many CEE countries to varying degrees.

Of the ten worst performing EU members on the 2023 Corruption Perception Index, seven joined the EU after 2000. Four EU members, all CEE, even ranked outside the top 50. On the World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index, Bulgaria and Hungary are at the bottom, with seven CEE countries in the bottom 10, and only Estonia cracking the top 10 among EU members. What also added to the perception of the CEE countries as supplicants was that all were net recipients of EU funds.²⁰

Yet, over time, plenty of success stories became apparent. Estonia led the way on digital governance, far outpacing the older member states.²¹ All CEE countries posted high growth rates and started converging toward the EU average.²² Poland was the only EU member that never entered recession during the financial crisis, and by 2023 had achieved an economic weight only slightly lower than Spain's. This record allowed the country to speak with significant weight in economic discussions, even as its GDP per capita was in the lower half of the EU and was not using the single currency. Several CEEs surpassed the GDP per capita of older members, such as Greece and Portugal.²³ Countries like Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Croatia, and Bulgaria adopted the Euro, performing better on the official criteria than several older members.

The appointment of Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk as President of the European Council in 2014 was clear recognition that Poland had established itself at the core of the EU and of the personal standing of its prime minister. The election in 2015 of the Law and Justice Party (PiS), a party of a far more nationalist, xenophobic, and authoritarian bend, changed that. For the next eight years, Poland backslid on democracy and the rule of law, and its standing in the EU diminished. PiS' renewed penchant for picking fights with Germany over World War II did not help.²⁴ Between 2015 and 2023, Poland joined Hungary, led since 2010 by Viktor Orbán, in being the *bête noire* in the Council.²⁵ With support from the European Parliament, the European Commission has several times sought to bring Art. Seven proceedings against the two countries for their failure to protect the rule of law and live up to EU values, only for the two to protect one another by casting vetoes.²⁶

A controversial issue, where the CEEs took the lead, at least to some extent, was migration, especially during the 2015 crisis when more than one million migrants crossed the EU's outer borders. While many in Brussels seemed paralyzed, Hungary and Austria, with strong support from Poland, sealed their borders, and put a stop to the lawlessness. That harsh action undermined EU cohesion on migration, as much as Western resignation and inaction.²⁷ The Commission's proposed "solution," the mandatory redistribution of asylum seekers among member states, was fiercely resisted by the Visegrad countries, who argued that such decisions were within the exclusive competence of the member states. What gradually became clear, though, was that despite the criticisms directed at the harshness of the Austrian and Hungarian policies, public opinion across the Union disapproved of the way the issue was handled by Brussels and strongly favored a harder line on border and migration issues. The harder line on border security has since become prevalent in the EU discourse, even if few

acknowledge its origins. The “newer” members’ arrival in Brussels was always bound to shake things up, but relations with Russia became a particular flashpoint.

Relations with Russia

As new members of NATO, the CEEs largely followed the U.S. line during the War on Terror, seeing the Americans as the best guarantee of their own security. On the question of further NATO enlargement, the CEEs were mostly in favor. During Ukraine’s Orange Revolution of 2004–2005, Lithuania and Poland played a key mediating role, leading to the new elections that saw Viktor Yushchenko elected president. At the infamous Bucharest Summit in the spring of 2008, the CEE countries generally supported the U.S. position of offering Membership Action Plans to Georgia and Ukraine, only to see the proposal shot down by France, Germany, and other western European states.²⁸ The Russian-Georgian war of August 2008 that followed was perceived very differently in different parts of Europe: Whereas France and Germany were pleased to have contained the conflict, some CEEs saw a harbinger of worse to come.²⁹

Within NATO, as America changed from Bush to Obama, the emphasis also changed between confronting Russia and re-engaging. Despite Vladimir Putin having stated his hostility toward the West at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, and backed it up with brutal force against Georgia, Barack Obama still entered office convinced he could somehow “reset” relations with Russia.³⁰ The “reset,” and the almost simultaneous U.S. cancellation of the missile defense systems that Poland and the Czech Republic had agreed to host, led to some nervousness. Aside from the air police mission over the Baltic states, established in 2005 to ward off Russian incursions, all further calls to station allied forces permanently in forward areas were also dismissed with reference to the NATO-Russia Founding Act, although NATO did, for the first time, undertake contingency planning for Central Europe and the Baltic states.³¹

EU policy toward Russia was also largely set by the larger and most powerful western countries. In 2007, a European Council on Foreign Relations report grouped the EU members based on their attitudes toward Russia.³² France, Germany, and Italy were classified as “strategic partners,” in that they prioritized their own special relationships over the common interest. By contrast, Poland and Lithuania were “new Cold Warriors,” while Estonia, Latvia, and the Czech Republic, among others, were “frosty pragmatists.” Greece and Cyprus were labeled “Trojan horses,” others as “friendly pragmatists.” The size and influence of the friendly camp—in which the members, due to their size and importance, could credibly strike out with unilateral policies—meant that the more cautious member states had an uphill battle persuading others to take a harder line on Russia.

In the case of Ukraine policy, Lithuania and Poland helped bring the Orange Revolution to a peaceful conclusion but were subsequently disappointed when the

Commission did not take the opportunity to significantly upgrade relations with Ukraine, instead preferring to adhere strictly to the agreements agreed prior to the political changes in Kyiv so as not to antagonize Russia.³³ However, Poland, this time in partnership with Sweden—this, after all, was while Poland played the game of partnership in Brussels—launched the Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative later adopted as EU policy. The EaP envisaged a close political alignment between the partner state and the EU, and the gradual introduction of a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) that included the adoption of EU product standards and single market regulations. While the EaP showed what a positive agenda could achieve, the new policy was plagued by its own fundamental ambiguity: was it a steppingstone toward accession, or was it a permanent framework?³⁴

Germany and others continued prioritizing their economic relations with Russia. *Ostpolitik* has a long pre-history, and the impulse to reach out and seek accommodation with Russia remains strongly ingrained in Germany.³⁵ The 2005 decision to build the first North Stream pipeline was very much in the vein of *Ostpolitik*, especially as practiced by Germany's Social Democrats under the slogan of "change through interdependence." The pipeline plan was fiercely criticized by most of Germany's EU partners on the Baltic Sea, all of whom argued that too much dependence on Russia could be weaponized against the EU. In contrast, Germany prided itself on its pragmatism.³⁶ When Ukraine and Russia became caught up in disputes over gas prices and transit fees in 2006 and 2009, both times jeopardizing several EU members' energy security, there was little coherence within the EU, and even less support for Ukraine. The Baltic states sought to strengthen their energy security by enhancing the EU's role in energy policy but were only partly successful. Energy policy was to remain a source of tension within the EU.³⁷

From the pragmatic pro-business view, held by Germany and others, the Baltic states and Poland were unreasonably Russophobic. In fairness, their alarmism was frequently betrayed by domestic practices that undermined their message. For instance, while the Baltic states issued dire warnings after the Russo-Georgian War of 2008, they did not themselves show much concern for national security. Only Estonia maintained defense spending at around 2 percent, while both Latvia and Lithuania cut budgets consistently and significantly between 2008 and 2014, with both dropping to well below 1 percent before 2014.³⁸ That did not send a strong signal regarding the threat's supposed urgency. Poland also did not meet the 2 percent target, but instead hovered around 1.7 percent through this period. Moreover, why exactly was it so wrong for Germany to import Russian gas, when the Baltic states (and Ukraine) seemed happy to do so themselves? Such questions undoubtedly undermined these countries' ability to overcome their limited weight by presenting a new Russia strategy as either a persuasive idea or a compelling demand. However, even the most imperfect messenger may nonetheless be delivering the right message.

The grounds of debate shifted slightly with Russia's attacks on Ukraine, following the Euromaidan uprising and the ouster of the corrupt pro-Russian President Viktor

Yanukovich, beginning in late February 2014 with the occupation of Crimea, followed by the illegal annexation on 21 March. This time the blatant violation of international law and numerous treaties could not be completely ignored. The EU imposed targeted sanctions on certain Russian individuals and corporate entities held to be particularly responsible for the annexation.³⁹ Yet these were not the forceful sanctions that might have compelled a change in Russian behavior. They were instead of the “signaling” kind, meant to indicate a level of displeasure at events. This naturally reflected the divisions within the EU, as some members were concerned about setting off a spiraling escalation. However, as past research has amply demonstrated, weak sanctions primarily signal weakness, not strength, thus heightening the risk of further conflict escalation.⁴⁰ Further sanctions followed in July 2014, this time targeting the Russian financial and oil exploration sectors. However, this was not a response to the annexation of Crimea or the war in Donbas but followed the downing of Malaysian Airline MH17 by Russian proxies on 17 July 2014. Several years later, Dutch investigators revealed “strong indications” that Vladimir Putin had personally been involved in the downing of the aircraft, which resulted in considerable loss of lives.⁴¹

Ukraine’s Association Agreement with the EU, the proximate cause for the Euromaidan and Russia’s military attacks, was finally signed in June 2014. All provisions, including the DCFTA, came into effect on 1 September 2017 and had notable and positive effects on Ukraine’s economic performance until 2022.⁴² Some EU members continually thereafter sought to upgrade relations with Ukraine, but there was no longer a unified CEE or Visegrad front on the issue. While Poland and the Baltic states led the hawkish camp, with moderate support from the United Kingdom, others supported the Russian position. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán voiced frequent support for Putin, as did Czech president Milos Zeman, the latter even going as far as stating that Crimea should be recognized as Russian.⁴³

Even the “Russia first” line among key member states held to some extent. This was notable in the “Normandy format” negotiations of 2014–2015, in which France and Germany led the EU’s attempts at mediating. The resulting Minsk I and II agreements were not only deeply flawed and unfair to Ukraine, treating Russia as an arbiter rather than the aggressor; they also showed the clear limit to what the EU members could agree.⁴⁴ The European Council meeting of 20 March 2015 showed a problematic shift, as the EU explicitly tied its sanctions to the implementation of the Minsk Agreements, rather than the restoration of Ukrainian sovereignty, thus effectively sidelining the entire issue of Crimea.⁴⁵

NATO took bolder steps, on paper at least. In September 2014, at the Wales summit, the alliance recommitted to spending 2 percent of GDP on their militaries, pledging to reach the target by 2024. The number of NATO members following the agreed guideline target did indeed double to ten between 2014 and 2021, among them Poland, the Baltic states, and Romania.⁴⁶ Many others, however, left spending unchanged, raised it only slowly, or, in some cases, continued letting it drop. A bigger breakthrough came at the Warsaw summit in July 2016, when the members agreed

for the first time to deploy troops on its eastern members' territory as part of the NATO Enhanced Forward Presence.⁴⁷ Although symbolically important, the forces themselves were, and remain, deterrence by tripwire. Even so, NATO was at least back to talking of Russia as a security threat.⁴⁸

The wish not to alienate Russia held sway, though, on the question of supplying weapons to Ukraine. Here too, older members were the most reluctant. German Chancellor Angela Merkel frequently repeated that mantra that the conflict could have no military solution, and supplying arms was therefore the wrong approach.⁴⁹ U.S. President Obama shared this defeatist approach, let France and Germany take the lead in the Minsk talks, blithely ignored the moral obligations implicit in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, and declined to support Ukraine with lethal weapons.⁵⁰ The Merkel-Obama approach served mainly to entrench Russia's military advantage and limited the scope for others to support Ukraine. However, Czechia, Lithuania, and Poland offered lethal aid, mainly in the form of ammunition and domestically produced weapons systems.⁵¹ Ironically, it was Donald Trump, who otherwise expressed frequent admiration for Vladimir Putin, who first authorized the transfer of American weaponry, Javelin anti-tank missiles, to Ukraine.⁵²

Right up until the full-scale invasion in 2022, there were voices, both in the political mainstream and from the pro-Russian fringes, who continued calling for negotiations with Russia or for sidelining the conflict to better focus on other matters of shared concern. High Representative Federica Mogherini voiced such a view when tabling an "Issues Paper on Relations with Russia" for the Council to discuss in 2015. The 2016 EU Global Strategy labeled Russia a "strategic challenge" Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker in 2018 still called for an end to the "Russia bashing" to end and for "reconnecting" with Russia.⁵³

On energy policy, some progress was made in the form of the 2015 Energy Union, a brainchild of then-Council President Donald Tusk. It sought, among other things, to limit EU exposure to Russia but brought little change as few countries wished to surrender control of this key sector.⁵⁴ Countries were still largely left to their own devices, although the European Commission sought to take a greater role and enforce EU law more consistently. Bulgaria canceled the South Stream pipeline project under Commission pressure.⁵⁵ Other members sought to diversify their supply options; for instance, Lithuania acquired an LNG terminal so as to decrease dependency on Russian imports. Germany, on the other hand, doubled down on their dependence on Russia by pursuing the North Stream 2 project.⁵⁶ Whereas the first pipeline had been grudgingly tolerated by most neighbors, even embraced by Denmark, the second project met with uniform opposition from all Germany's EU and NATO partners in the Baltic Sea region.⁵⁷ The European Commission also raised significant legal concerns over Germany's partnership with Russia.⁵⁸ Even Donald Trump sounded the warning, saying at the UN General Assembly that, "Reliance on a single foreign supplier can leave nations vulnerable to extortion and intimidation."⁵⁹ At the 2019 Munich Security Conference, Vice-President Mike Pence chimed in, "we cannot

ensure the defense of the West if our allies grow dependent on the East.”⁶⁰ Germany would not be dissuaded, though, and armed with opinion polls showing strong domestic support for the pipeline, ran roughshod over all objections.⁶¹

The events since February 2022 obviously led to soul-searching among many German decision makers, but not Angela Merkel. Her memoirs, published in 2024, reveal little about why she made the choices she did; not about the 2008 Bucharest Summit, not about the decision to build North Stream 2.⁶² Her insistence that her handling of the Minsk Process was right, that it bought Ukraine time to build up its forces, and that she was never naïve about Putin’s quest to tear the EU apart, only raise more questions.⁶³ If she had no illusions about Putin—in fact, considered him a “rulebreaker” who “must be stopped”—why did she go ahead with Nord Stream 2?⁶⁴ Why did she fail to authorize German rearmament? If buying time for Ukraine was the goal of the Minsk Agreements, why did she refuse to help it build up its military? Having dominated German and European politics for a decade and a half, Angela Merkel’s reputation has suffered immensely since her retirement.⁶⁵

The Change since February 2022

The Russian invasion on 24 February 2022 largely settled the internal EU debate. The past warnings of Poland and the Baltics states about Russian intentions were vindicated, while Olaf Scholz and Emmanuel Macron, both of whom had invested much effort in last-minute diplomacy with Russia, were left embarrassed when Putin, despite his “assurances,” opted for war. Only the Russia hawks could now provide a suitable rhetorical framing for discussions; their ideas were the more persuasive in the changed context.

Having for long, perhaps too long, sought to avoid an open conflict with Russia, Western Europeans were now in one, and initially struggled to find their feet. President Macron had put his faith in his ability to cajole Putin with shuttle diplomacy, convinced that France could play as a mediator; that effort now looked flailing.⁶⁶ Macron did not make things easier for himself when, in May 2022, he cautioned that Europe should resist the “temptation of humiliation [of Russia], and after the war not face it in ‘the spirit of revenge.’” However noble such thoughts, the sentiment seemed misplaced as Ukraine was fighting an existential battle. The French president strove to maintain an open line to Moscow to provide “off-ramps” for Putin, seemingly unaware how discredited France and Germany’s Minsk efforts had become.⁶⁷ This exasperation with Macron led to a memorable slap-down from Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, who commented on Macron’s efforts: “Why talk to [Putin]? He’s a war criminal! . . . If everyone is constantly calling him, he doesn’t get the message that he’s isolated.”⁶⁸

Germany had also lost moral standing as a result of the war and struggled for some time to find its footing. Days after the invasion, Chancellor Scholz starkly

declared that a *Zeitenwende* had occurred, in which Russia could no longer be seen as a partner, but as a threat to be confronted, necessitating immediate and significant rises in military expenditure.⁶⁹ In April 2022, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, until then a leading proponent of the close relationship with Russia, acknowledged Germany's past mistakes and its failure to listen to its allies' warnings: "We failed on many points."⁷⁰ Even so, Germany's leaders found it hard to follow through on their newfound commitment.⁷¹

France and Germany, their old positions discredited, finally started changing their stance shortly before the EU and NATO summits of June 2022. The European Council of 23–24 June expressed unequivocal support for Ukraine by tightening sanctions against Russia and by the member states pledging to strengthen their military capabilities. Most importantly, the European Council also granted Ukraine and Moldova membership perspectives, for the first time recognizing their potential place in the community.⁷² The declaration of the NATO summit in Madrid on 28–30 June re-affirmed the alliance's collective security guarantee, Art. 5, for its members, issued the strongest possible condemnation of Russian aggression, and declared NATO's "unwavering support for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders," that is, including Crimea.⁷³ Such strongly-worded statements, hard to imagine a year earlier, showed that the balance of opinion within both organizations had shifted since the invasion and that others were now setting the tone and framing the discussions. As Olaf Scholz commented in September 2022 during a visit to Prague to discuss bilateral security cooperation and efforts to support Ukraine, "The centre of Europe is moving eastwards . . . Germany has undergone a fundamental change of heart on this issue in recent months. We will keep up this support . . . for as long as it takes."⁷⁴

The war also changed Poland's standing, in particular. With U.S. and U.K. support, Poland took the lead on helping Ukraine, both in military and humanitarian terms. Having been somewhat marginalized under the PiS government, and the subject of repeated Commission attempts to censure its undermining of the rule of law, Poland now took center stage. Having been an early lone voice sounding the warning, it could now speak with authority at a time when the EU's traditional leaders could not. Since 2014, Poland had maintained defense spending above 2 percent dramatically raised it even further; by mid-2024, it far surpassed U.S. defense expenditure as a proportion of GDP.⁷⁵ Having been the black sheep for several years, Poland's political practice was suddenly to be emulated.⁷⁶ For a time, at least, even the European Commission backed off on its rule of law criticisms.

Russia's initial aggression in 2014 had been met with a limited EU response of weak, signaling sanctions. Since 2022, by contrast, the Union has passed nineteen sanctions packages covering everything from financial sanctions to freezing assets, from shipping to flight bans, dual-use products to industrial and luxury products, as well as targeted sanctions against hundreds of companies and individuals.⁷⁷ Achieving consensus on a policy of this scope was time-consuming; that it was achieved at all

proved the degree to which the center of gravity had shifted. Even secondary sanctions on third parties' trade with Russia were discussed, although not yet adopted.⁷⁸

Even energy policy debates shifted to grounds more favorable to the Russia-skeptic camp. Shortly before the invasion, Germany was shamed into suspending approval of the finished North Stream 2 pipeline. The sabotage of both North Stream 1 and 2 in September 2022 ended all talk of resuming the partnership with Russia. German unilateralism had undermined the energy security of the entire EU; but after February 2022, the country sought to rectify the damage by investing in LNG terminals and interconnectors across Europe. Gradually the Union weaned itself off imported Russian gas, and after a short but dramatic spike in autumn 2022 prices returned to normal levels. By early 2025, Russia's share of European gas imports had fallen from 40 to 11 percent. The final direct route for Russian gas—land-based pipelines crossing Ukraine—stopped working when the remaining agreements expired at the end of 2024. Oil imports also declined by 90 percent compared to 2021, despite the many loopholes in the sanction regime. In May 2025, the Commission launched further plans to fully ban Russian natural gas imports by 2027 and further reduce imports of oil products.⁷⁹

The trajectory of events in NATO and the EU remained positive for Ukraine through the summer of 2023. The Vilnius Summit, 11–12 July, reiterated NATO support for Ukraine's security and territorial integrity, and acknowledged that Ukraine's future lies in NATO, "when Allies agree and conditions are met."⁸⁰ This fell short of a clear target date—which could not reasonably have been expected with the war still ongoing—but did state that Ukraine would eventually be able to dispense with the usual Membership Action Plan. The Alliance's 75th anniversary summit in Washington, DC in July 2024 re-emphasized this point, along with a pledge for Ukraine to receive a minimum of \$40 billion in military support annually for the near future.⁸¹ At the same time, the EU too was making plans for how to support Ukraine's war efforts militarily and financially for the long term. After a slow start, the EU and its members overtook the United States as the largest donors to Ukraine's cause.⁸² In her State of the EU speech of September 2023, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen further committed the EU to supporting Ukraine "every step of the way."⁸³ Even on the question of eventual Ukrainian EU membership, as recently as 2021 still a matter of controversy, the ground has shifted. Following Ukraine's application for membership in early 2022, a series of positive Commission reports led to the formal opening of accession talks in June 2024.⁸⁴ Once again, the pro-Ukrainian CEE countries' position had proven the more persuasive.

A sign of the changing dynamics was also notable in the filling of various top positions during 2024. The post of NATO Secretary General had long been eyed by both Poland and the Baltic states, yet strong candidates like Radek Sikorski and Kaja Kallas were long thought too "Russophobic" by many, and Jens Stoltenberg's term was extraordinarily extended several times.⁸⁵ That post eventually went to the Dutchman Mark Rutte; Kallas, however, secured the position as EU High

Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, while the newly established post of Commissioner for Defence went to a Lithuanian, Andrius Kubilius.⁸⁶ Thus, two Balts would be wielding the agenda-setting power provided by these two positions.

Several CEE countries, individually or in smaller groups, launched important initiatives that set the tenor for the European debate. Czechia launched a program for purchasing artillery grenades for Ukraine, which gained the support of multiple EU members, exceeding expectations to the benefit of the Ukrainian war effort.⁸⁷ Seeking to lead from the front, Estonia—already by far Ukraine’s biggest supporter relative to GDP size—committed itself, in early 2024, to continuously spend at least 0.25 percent of GDP to support Ukraine, encouraging other EU and NATO members to do the same.⁸⁸ The initiative has not met universal acclaim, though, and is only nominally supported by countries like Greece, Portugal, and Spain.⁸⁹ Poland, aside from its sizeable weapons donations, has spearheaded efforts to train Ukrainian military personnel, in partial cooperation with France, not least in the use of the donated NATO equipment. By March 2025, more than 30,000 Ukrainian soldiers had been trained in Poland.⁹⁰

In the space of three years, policy in both the EU and NATO shifted drastically in the direction of what the CEE Russia hawks had long advocated for years. Circumstance had played its part, in tragic ways, but events vindicated advocacy for a harder line—both as persuasive ideas and compelling demands—and the hawkish CEE members were now taking an active and leading role in shaping and implementing the new policies.

Will It Last?

Speaking in Bratislava on 31 May 2023, Macron made the case for continued support for Ukraine,

even after Slovakia and many other countries joined the Union, we did not always hear the voices you brought, calling for recognition of your painful memories and history. Some said to you then that you were missing opportunities to pipe down—but I believe *we sometimes missed opportunities to listen* [emphasis added]. That time is over, and today, those voices must be all our voices.⁹¹

The balance of agenda-setting power in the EU and NATO has shifted somewhat, as has the policy content, as it is now the Russia doves who, although still vocal, must justify their reluctance to help Ukraine and confront Putin’s Russia. However, if the hawkish CEE members of the EU and NATO have achieved a level of influence due to their stance on this issue, it is a far more open question if they can translate it to long-term influence going beyond relations with Russia. There are reasons to be skeptical.

As laid out at the start, influence is a function of size, resources, good practice, and persuasive ideas for addressing EU concerns and moving integration forward. Soon enough, the laws of gravity will reassert themselves, and the largest and richest countries will regain their voice. The Baltic states are model members, but they are small. Poland and other pro-EU CEE countries must therefore develop a persuasive agenda in other fields too, to make their newfound influence last. With the partial exception of immigration and asylum policy, it is, at present, hard to see that happening.

The very change within the EU and NATO posture may also over time undermine the Russia hawks' current standing. First-mover advantage is relative in politics, and gives little long-term control of an agenda, as others will inevitably adopt similar stances once a viewpoint becomes established. It is quite conceivable that some of those Western countries that only recently embraced hawkish positions toward Russia will eventually come to exert leadership in this field too. Although he started hesitantly, and long believed in striking a deal with Russia, Emmanuel Macron has moved significantly since February 2023, coming out in favor of eventual Ukrainian membership of both the EU and NATO, as well as supporting EU enlargement with other eastern and southern candidates.⁹² Although France's material contribution remains limited, for Macron to make another drastic change of position while in office is unlikely. German Chancellor Friedrich Merz has signaled that his government will step up support for Ukraine, solidifying Germany's commitment to its post-2022 pro-Ukrainian policy.⁹³ Similarly, countries like Denmark and the Netherlands led the way by donating F-16 fighter jets, which raised their profiles. Another noteworthy initiative is the so-called "Danish model" which allows procurement through Ukrainian companies but with finance from partners abroad.⁹⁴ Poland and the Baltic states were always unlikely to have the issue of Russia relations all to themselves for long.

Standing in several CEE countries' way are domestic political practices that have put them at odds with both EU institutions and other governments. Democratic backsliding and concern over the rule of law in several countries has not gone away. Poland was long in the Commission's crosshairs; at the end of 2022, it stood to lose €36 billion in EU funding due to reforms that infringed the independence of the judiciary.⁹⁵ The change of government in late 2023, which saw Donald Tusk return to power in Warsaw, brought about a renewed rapprochement with Brussels and once more saw Poland approach the core of the EU. By mid-2025, all frozen funds had been unblocked, but fully reestablishing Poland's credibility after eight years of PiS will take time. Whether the election of Karol Nawrocki as president will complicate Poland's rehabilitation remains to be seen.⁹⁶

Viktor Orbán, on the other hand, still firmly entrenched in Budapest, remains determined to confront the EU. Constant spats over the rule of law, civil rights, "sovereignty laws" allegedly targeting NGOs and opposition groups, as well as Orbán's constant labeling of the EU as warmongers over the support for Ukraine, have soured relations between Hungary and the EU. The country is currently missing out on €16

billion of EU funding, with one billion permanently lost, due to rule of law disputes with the Commission. Through some hardball tactics and issue linkage to Ukraine's membership application, Orbán succeeded in unblocking €10 billion in December 2013.⁹⁷ Although successful in the short term, the episode left a sour taste with Hungary's partners and has been subject to legal challenges since.

Poland and Hungary long protected each other against severe EU sanctions by using their veto to shield the other from Article 7 procedures. Yet, the two have slowly parted company. In spring 2023, their history on opposite sides of World War II led to a short, but fierce spat.⁹⁸ Orbán's frequent rhetorical support for Putin over Ukraine also strained relations, to the point where even PiS considered abandoning their alliance. The Hungarian prime minister's assertion that Donald Tusk had been "installed" by Brussels, and comparing the EU to the Soviet Union, only alienated the Poles.⁹⁹

Viktor Orbán, however, does not feel short of either allies or ambition. The election of Robert Fico in Slovakia—a left-wing populist with an authoritarian strain—provided a new ally to change the EU. Fico has dismantled the free press, anti-corruption watchdogs, and checks on government power.¹⁰⁰ The commitment to democracy and the rule of law in Romania and Czechia, and Bulgaria's long-running political crisis, were also cause for concern. With their political practice increasingly under scrutiny, the CEE countries will struggle as persuasive agenda-setters.

Underscoring Hungary's relative detachment from the EU mainstream, the European Parliament passed a resolution deploring the state of Hungary's democracy and governance ahead of its autumn 2024 term as head of the rotating Council presidency.¹⁰¹ The presidency was marked by several "trolling practices" that weakened EU cohesion. Most notorious of these was Orbán's unilateral "peace mission" to Moscow, which had not been agreed with the European partners he supposedly represented.¹⁰² At the end of Hungary's presidency, there was widespread relief when Poland took over at the helm.

Another problem is that the once-solid CEE pro-Ukraine bloc is cracking. A sense of "war weariness"—an exhaustion among some with footing the financial bill for Ukraine's struggle—has emerged in much of Europe. The Eurobarometer still shows significant support for helping Ukraine, but other polls suggest a certain softening.¹⁰³ Abandonment by its neighbors is now an increasingly realistic scenario for Ukraine, as several countries have moved in a populist direction.¹⁰⁴ Hungary was always the least friendly, mostly echoing Russian perspectives on the war. It joined the EU sanctions regime but frequently threatened to veto its periodic renewal. The government has also positioned itself strongly against Ukrainian EU membership.¹⁰⁵ Poland's PiS-led government supported aiding Ukraine, even as the "grain row" in 2023 caused friction. Since losing office, it has become more circumspect. Following Fico's election in Slovakia, all military, but not humanitarian, aid was frozen amid Russia-friendly rhetoric from the government. Although the Romanian center ultimately held, George Simion, described as a far-right populist, friendly to Russia, and in favor of ending military aid for Ukraine, came within a whisker of winning the

presidency. In both Czechia and Bulgaria, the leading opposition parties are moving in the same direction.¹⁰⁶

Most of these politicians represent themselves as “national conservative,” frequently claim affinity with Donald Trump’s MAGA movement, and generally have a positive view of Vladimir Putin, whom they see as a defender of “traditional values.”¹⁰⁷ This political development mirrors the trend in Western Europe, where the political extremes have long leaned toward Putin and Russia: *Alternative für Deutschland* in Germany, *Rassemblement National* in France, and *La Lega* in Italy on the right; *La France Insoumise* in France, and *Sarah Wagenknecht* and *Die Linke* in Germany on the left. In terms of CEE and policy on Russia, this tendency may soon have as much claim to representing the whole group as Poland and the Baltic states.

Moreover, no topic is immune from the grubbier aspects of EU decision making, as member states pursue national goals, occasionally at the expense of the common European interest. For example, France insists that all weaponry supplied to Ukraine must originate in Europe, while closer EU-UK cooperation on security long risked being undermined by disputes over fishing rights (*sic!*).¹⁰⁸ There are, furthermore, many other pressing issues straining the EU’s notoriously limited political bandwidth: the war in Gaza, continued migration and border problems; enlargement and internal reform, and the new Trump administration and its trade wars.

The elephant in the room, which may well determine the agenda for Europe’s relations with Russia and Ukraine, is the United States and the Trump administration. Whereas Joe Biden steered a steady course during the war’s early phase and was instrumental in organizing the joint response, Donald Trump signaled his displeasure at U.S. aid to Ukraine, which played a part in Congress’ holding up aid packages during the winter of 2023–2024. Trump’s negative rhetoric on the campaign trail during 2024 contributed to a marked softening of public support for the Ukrainian cause.¹⁰⁹ Trump’s approach to peace negotiations during the early months of his presidency scotched any notion of a united transatlantic front against Putin. With Europe relegated to the sidelines, an anguished debate emerged as to how Europe would manage continued Russian aggression and how it would be able to defend itself.¹¹⁰ No matter the moral arguments, and even if Europe and Ukraine would not collapse in America’s absence, such a development would necessarily force a reassessment of commitments, in which a small hawkish group should not expect to exert much influence.

Lastly, when the war eventually ends, and normality returns, the tedious old ways of doing politics will also return. Although Ukraine will have much goodwill among EU members, it will have to jump through all the hoops of the EU accession process (NATO’s process will be simpler), which will stretch over several years. There will be much hard negotiations before Ukraine can join, and Ukraine has much to do if it is to prove itself ready. Already prior to 2022, Ukraine had a long, hard road ahead of it, and the country’s struggle with endemic corruption remains a major problem.¹¹¹ As an EU and NATO candidate, and eventually as a member, Ukraine will be subject to the same dynamics as all the others; it will be a newcomer, having to learn the

ropes, and most likely a net recipient of funds from the common budget. In short, it too will have to establish practice and credibility within the organizations.

Conclusion

Attractive as the idea is, that the war in Ukraine has recast relations within the EU and NATO, it seems unlikely. Many factors—not simply being right on a single issue, no matter how prominent—determines power and influence. Political practice, adherence to norms, economic weight, and countries’ standing among their peers will shape the power balances inside both organizations. In that analysis, many CEE countries do not have the kind of stellar records that will easily allow them to transform their current influence on Russia policy into something more lasting across other issues. As time passes, circumstances change and new responses are required, other countries will likely rediscover their voice and chart alternative policies.

Even so, increased awareness of the threat from the East has transformed policy toward Russia and Ukraine within the EU and NATO. The hawkish camp speaks with authority, even if they cannot presume to have *carte blanche* in setting policy. Conversely, countries that for too long misread Russian intentions, thus contributing to the current conflict, suffered a loss of authority and will have to show that they have learned from their mistakes, if they wish to regain their standing on policy toward Eastern Europe. It will be a sad irony indeed, if, at the very time when opinion on Russia and Ukraine has largely swung to the position most CEE countries wanted it to be, they will be unable to exert persuasive leadership due to their undermining or even abandonment of their own old positions.

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