

April 2023

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The West and Central and Eastern Europe Need to Go South: Emerging Global Blocks and the Russia-Ukraine War

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Executive Summary

Western states demonstrate robust support for Ukraine against the Russian invasion. This contrasts with the visibly disengaged position of many states of the Global South. It would be a grave mistake to misinterpret this disengagement of most Southern states as a manifestation of pro-Russian attitudes. To promote their core interests, policymakers, media, and the public in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) should pursue and support a four-fold strategy towards the Global South: (1) The war in Ukraine needs to be kept at the top of the list of priorities on the agenda of major international fora and public debates. At the same time, (2) CEE states should participate in robust diplomatic engagement with the states of the Global South and take seriously the significant economic and security challenges they face. 3) CEE states are uniquely positioned to counter the spreading Russian narrative of an antihegemonic and anticolonial war globally. They should make full use of this position. 4) CEE states should forcefully support global multilateral fora, with the UN at the center, despite possible reservations based on the inability of the UN Security Council to prevent the Russian invasion.

The challenge for Central and Eastern European foreign policy: from seeming global unity on the Russia-Ukraine war to the West against the 'Rest'?

The War in Ukraine has entered its second year without prospects for an early end. Neither of the warring parties seems to possess the capacity to win the war in short to medium term. The stated positions of Ukraine and Russia are fundamentally opposed, preventing any meaningful negotiations in the foreseeable future.

About the author

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At the same time, policymakers, the public, and the media in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) now recognize a significant challenge less visible in the first year of the war. What was sometimes presented as an almost global unity in condemnation of the Russian aggression in the spring of 2022 shows growing cracks. Numerous non-Western actors have taken steps that seem to favor Russian interests rather than Ukraine's. China manifestly presents itself as the closest powerful ally of Russia, stepping up its verbal support for the Russian position and its role in the challenge of American hegemony. India continues to refuse to openly condemn Russia in formal settings, such as the United Nations General Assembly, its imports of Russian oil have grown dramatically since the invasion, and India's ties to Russia in the arms trade continue to be close. On the first anniversary of the invasion, South Africa conducted joint naval drills with Russia and China, following the warm welcome it extended to the Russian foreign minister Lavrov earlier in 2023. Survey data highlight that the public in such states as China, India, or Turkey understand Russia as an ally or a necessary partner rather than a rival or an adversary, in stark contrast to the public among EU member states or the U.S.[1] The anti-Western narrative that portrays the war as the West's fault rings louder and louder in various world corners.

A simplifying view on these developments would be that rather than global unity Europe and CEE states hoped for, we observe a return to the pre-war normal, with an increasingly open contest between the collective 'West,' and 'the Rest'. The former block is variably associated with the G7 group and particularly NATO, and undoubtedly US-led. The

latter block comprises the Global South associated primarily with the leadership of the BRICS group. The two are on a collision course, and if anything, the war has made the collision more likely.

The central argument of this brief is that this bipolar view is seriously misleading. Western policymakers, media, and the public, and particularly those in the CEE region, must understand that the situation is far more nuanced. And that it is in the interest of the West and the CEE states to systematically explore the rather rich opportunities for collaboration with the Global South.



Indian PM Narendra Modi meets Vladimir Putin at the Summit in Smarand (Source: Flickr.com/meaindia)

Analysis: attention spans, priority agendas, and the Russian narrative

Three significant factors shape the position of the states of the Global South, beyond China, towards the war.

First, the **attention attached** to the war by policymakers and the public has declined worldwide, and never has it been as high in other regions as in

[1] https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/United-West-divided-from-the-rest_Leonard-Garton-Ash-Krastev.pdf

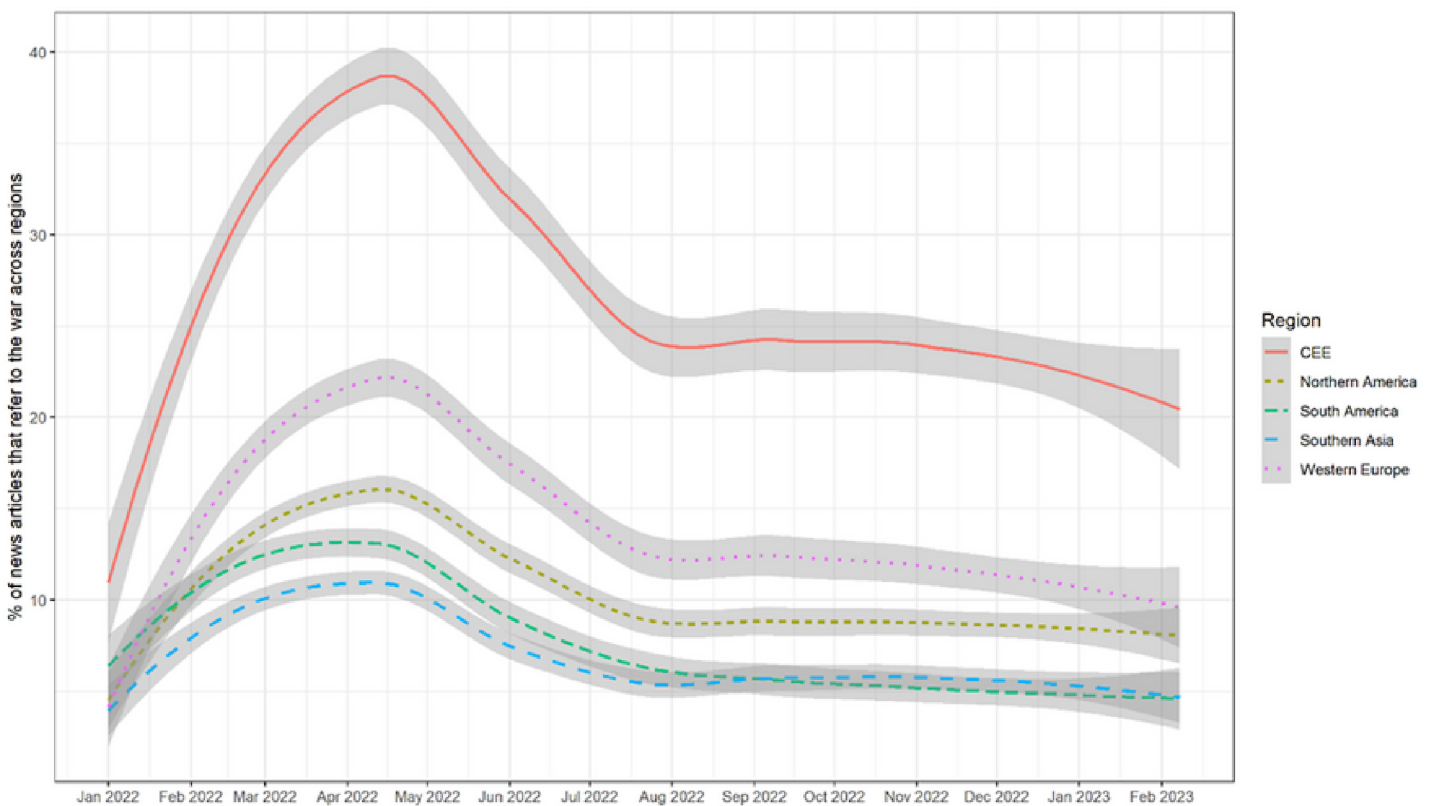
regions as in CEE. **Figure 1** demonstrates this point with data on news media visibility of the war across five selected world (sub)regions, drawing on data from project GLOWIN and its recent study. By February 2023, the share of news articles referring to the war has declined to one-half of the values from March and April 2022. Media in the CEE (excluding Ukraine and Russia themselves) have paid far more attention to the war than anyone else, with values up to 250% of those in North America and 400-500% of those in South America or South Asia. Even in Western Europe, the frequency of reporting on the war has only been around 50% of that in CEE.

Second, states of the Global South are re-focusing on what they perceive as more urgent problems, **priority agendas** closer to their core interests. India sees the opportunity to obtain the much-needed oil supplies

to feed its rapid economic growth. It is unwilling to sacrifice its lasting partnership with Russia, not the least due to its reliance on Russian military exports for its core defense projects. Many African states are threatened by mounting debt burdens connected with globally rising interest rates and import commodity prices. Some of them also face an imminent threat of famine due to persistent droughts and high prices of grain and fertilizers. The U.S. itself has been more concerned with the growing assertiveness of China than with Russia for many years. While it may not admit it readily, it will re-focus back on the Indo-Pacific region and its allies there sooner rather than later.

Third, for the most part, the steps taken by many states in Asia or Africa seemingly in favor of Russia are not necessarily pro-Russian per se. They may be

Figure 1: Media visibility of the war across selected world regions



Source: own calculations based on data from project GLOWIN (<https://glowin.cuni.cz/>).

anti-Western and anti-American, but not necessarily pro-Russian, let alone pro-invasion. The narrative of the war Russia is seeking to spread through the world is alluding to this: The war is presented as a necessary, even if unpleasant, part of a broader antihegemonic and anticolonial struggle. Lavrov summarized this position succinctly during his Africa tour in early February in Khartoum: “Our friends in Africa, Asia and Latin America are well aware of the fact that the ongoing processes stem from the geopolitical manipulations of the United States and its allies to maintain a hegemony in global affairs”[2]. This narrative will not sound implausible for those in the former “third world” who maintain strong anti-colonial (and anti-postcolonial) sentiments. When connected with the perceived racism of Western states and their prioritization of the Ukraine war, as compared to other crises in Africa and elsewhere, it may succeed in at least discouraging support for Ukraine and its Western allies and in nurturing political disengagement of states from the topic.

What is important for CEE policymakers, media, and the public is not to conflate these tendencies with inherent pro-Russian attitudes. We observe an effort by many states of the Global South to stay as far away as possible from the political conflicts surrounding the war and minimize the war’s impact on their economies. In their diplomacy, they despise the prospect of being pushed into sacrificing their relations with China, the BRICS block, and perhaps Russia itself by aligning closely with the West in support of Ukraine. Despite evidence of Russian atrocities, widespread anti-Americanism and anti-colonialism help them maintain this “non-aligned” position. However, this non-alignment should not

be misread as evidence of support for Russia or the war. The Indian foreign minister Jaishankar made this clear in his response to the critiques of Indian fence-sitting in the face of Russian aggression: “I am not sitting on the fence just because I don't agree with you. [...] I am sitting on my ground.”[3] India will pursue its national interest, which is to let the war interfere neither with its relations with the West nor with its relations and areas of cooperation with other BRICS powers and other partners from the Global South. Other states adopt similar positions.

Implications for CEE foreign policy: attention, engagement, counter-narratives, and multilateralism

The foreign policy of CEE states needs to take these realities into account. It should not misread steps taken by states in the Global South as a manifestation of their lack of understanding of the situation or moral and political opportunism. Instead, it should focus on the following four key areas:

First, it is essential that CEE policymakers consistently work on **keeping the war on the agenda of the highest fora globally**. It is not self-evident that the political attention paid to the war will persist. Other world regions will bring their priorities to the table. What they perceive as a replaying of the Cold war style US-Russia contestation will not reflect what challenges they perceive as the top priorities that must be addressed. CEE states must respect these differences in prioritization, but they must also invest in securing a continued prime position of the war on the international agenda.

[2] <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/russias-lavrov-visits-sudan-diplomatic-push-africas-sahel-2023-02-09/>

[3] <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/no-india-not-sitting-on-fence-jaishankar-says-europe-has-to-change-mindset-101654245499431.html>

Second, CEE states, primarily through the channels and tools of EU foreign policy, need to **engage as robustly as possible with the states of the Global South**. This entails investing massively in classical diplomatic offensives akin to, but more ambitious than, those exercised by Lavrov in early 2023 in Africa. Western and CEE policymakers and representatives should pay high-level visits to countries of the Global South, participate in key informal multilateral discussion fora with them, and their representatives should be seen paying basic respect to the regions in public. Some CEE and EU representatives have already embarked on this route. It also means engaging directly with the top material priorities and challenges of states particularly in Africa and Asia. As highlighted above, these have to do with mounting debt burdens, dangers of famines, and security concerns.

Third, CEE states have a particularly prominent opportunity to contribute to Western efforts to support Ukraine in **countering the Russian anticolonial narratives**. Most new member states of the EU and other states of the CEE region have, obviously, not belonged historically to the ‘West’ narrowly defined; they have little or no colonial past. If anything, some would recognize themselves as sharing with the Global South at least parts of the history of exploitation by their great power neighbors. No states globally are in a better position to explain the colonial nature of the Russian invasion than CEE states. The Russian strategic narrative of the invasion of Ukraine as a part of an anti-hegemonic struggle needs to be actively countered by the narrative of Russian imperialism, and CEE states are best positioned to represent the narrative. The key to the credibility of this effort lies in the ability of

CEE states to explain that one of the very reasons why CEE states seek to align closely with the historical ‘West’ lies precisely in their experience with Russian imperialism.

Fourth and last, CEE states need to offer full support to **multilateral fora** for dealing with the conflict and the specific concerns and priorities of the states of the Global South. While some CEE policymakers have expressed their disdain for the UN system and the UN Security Council in particular, it is these multilateral fora with the **UN at the core** that have provided voice and representation opportunities to the states of the ‘developing world,’ now forming the ‘Global South,’ over the last decades. Beyond the G20 informal group, the UN is the platform these states believe more than others. By engaging with them on this platform, the CEE states, the EU, and the West can demonstrate they take the concerns of the non-Western, yet not pro-Russian states seriously. To borrow the words of Indian foreign minister Jaishankar once more, they will show they understood that “Europe has to get out of the mindset that Europe’s problem is the world’s problem, but the world’s problem is not Europe’s problem.”[4]

None of these steps require massive economic or military capacities that CEE states often do not possess. The states of the region and their policymakers are in a position in which they can make an essential contribution to the support for Ukraine and to global security, while advancing their own core interests, with the means of diplomacy fully at their disposal.

[4] <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/europe-has-to-grow-out-of-mindset-that-its-problems-are-worlds-problems-jaishankar-7951895/>