

Central and Eastern European perceptions of the Eurasian Economic Union:

Between economic opportunities and fear of renewed Russian hegemony

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Abstract

This article aims to examine how the Central and Eastern European member states (CEECs) of the European Union (EU) perceive the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). In addition, it seeks to explore whether and to what extent these EU member states try to influence the EU's position on the EAEU and thus to what extent they try to project their views regarding the EAEU onto the EU level. In doing so, the article starts from the assumption that EU member states will seek to project or 'upload' certain national foreign policy objectives onto the EU level because of the possible 'amplifying' effect.

The article finds that perceptions of the EAEU among the CEECs vary significantly. Poland, Romania and the three Baltic countries are least supportive of the EAEU, and are very skeptical of Russia's political intentions behind the EAEU, which they view as a tool of Russian regional hegemony. Slovakia and the Czech Republic are skeptical of Russia's political intentions, but are interested in economic cooperation with the EAEU. Hungary and Bulgaria are most supportive of the EAEU and Hungary has even sought closer engagement with it. In explaining why the perceptions differ so strongly, the article points to a mix of historical and economic factors. The article also finds that the extent to which the CEECs seek to upload their views of the EAEU onto the EU level diverges. Poland, Lithuania and Hungary have been most vocal at the EU level and have actively sought to upload their views of the EAEU onto the EU level. Latvia, Estonia and Romania have been less vocal, but they have actively defended their views of the EAEU when initiatives at the EU level were launched by others that went against their positions on the EAEU. The Czech Republic, Slovakia and Bulgaria have been mostly passive and have tended to follow the consensus position reached at the EU. The article explains this divergence by referring to one particular condition that determines whether a EU member state will seek to upload its national foreign policy preferences onto the EU level, namely the perceived salience of a policy goal or issue.

Introduction

The establishment of the Eurasian Customs Union, and subsequently Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), has triggered a lot of academic interest, including in the implications for the European Union (EU) (Delcour et al., 2015; Della Sala, 2015; ICG, 2016). For many observers, the launch of the EAEU should be seen in light of Russia's current geopolitical aspirations, which include a reassertion of Russian hegemony in the countries that were under its control at the time of the Soviet Union (ICG, 2016; Kirkham, 2016; Trenin, 2011). Little is known, however, how the European countries that were part of the Soviet Union or Soviet bloc and are now members of the EU, perceive the EAEU. In exploring the perceptions and attitudes of these countries (Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Poland, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria)¹ towards the EAEU, this article examines not only how they perceive the EAEU but also to what extent they seek to project these views onto the EU level. In researching the latter question, the article starts from the assumption that EU member states will seek to project or 'upload' certain national foreign policy objectives onto the EU level because of the possible 'amplifying' effect (Bossuyt, 2017). Bottom-up Europeanization in the area of foreign policy may enable EU member states to pursue foreign policy objectives with regard to specific themes beyond those attainable with domestic capabilities (Baun and Marek, 2013, p.16; Keukeleire and Delreux, 2014, p.132; Hill and Wong, 2011, p.222).

Methodologically, the article relies on a combination of document analysis and in-depth interviews. The document analysis draws on both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include official statements of the EAEU and the CEECs. The secondary sources consist of a combination of academic publications, news articles and reports by think tanks and research institutes. In-depth interviews were conducted with EU officials and officials of the CEECs.²

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. Following this introduction, the CEECs' perceptions of the EAEU are outlined in detail. The next section analyses the extent to which the CEECs have sought to project their views on the EAEU onto the EU level. Next, the article offers some tentative explanations for the CEECs' diverging perceptions of the EAEU by pointing to a mix of historical and economic factors. The article then moves on to explain the diverging degree to which the CEECs seek to upload their views of the EAEU onto the EU level by making reference to one particular condition under which EU member states are likely to engage in uploading, namely the perceived salience of a policy goal or issue. The final section summarizes the main findings.

¹ For reasons of convenience, these countries will be referred to in the remainder of the article as 'CEECs', although it should be pointed out that this term does not perfectly match the geographical scope of all the countries.

² An overview of the interviews is provided at the end of the article.

Central and Eastern European perceptions of the EAEU

Perceptions of the EAEU among the CEECs appear to vary significantly. Based on their perceptions, three groups of countries can be distinguished. The first group consists of Poland, Romania and the three Baltic countries. They are least supportive of the EAEU, and are very skeptical about Russia's political intentions behind the EAEU, which they view as a tool of Russian regional hegemony. The second group comprises Slovakia and the Czech Republic. They are skeptical about Russia's political intentions, but are interested in economic cooperation with the EAEU. The third group includes Hungary and Bulgaria. They are very supportive of the EAEU and Hungary actively seek closer engagement with it.

Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia and Romania

This first group of countries shares the perception that the EAEU is mainly a geopolitical project. They view it above all as a political platform for economic integration, aimed at re-establishing Russia's position in the world as a major power (Interviews 1, 2, 6, 7, 8 and 9). Therefore, they are reluctant to lend support to it, as this would legitimize - what they see as - Russia's domination of the Eurasian region.

In their view, there are various signals indicating that the EAEU does not consistently promote rule-based integration and instead is being used by Russia as a foreign policy instrument serving its interests³ (Interviews 1, 2, 6 and 7; Sikorski, 2014). Their skepticism was further fuelled by their perception that the smaller member states, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, were pressurized by Russia into joining the EAEU; they only joined based on a trade off with Russia, namely security guarantee and continuation of labour migration, respectively (Interviews 1, 2, 6 and 7). The trade benefits of membership of the EAEU for these two countries are very limited, and in an institutional setting dominated by Russia they have little say over the decisions made within the EAEU and are fully subject to the whims of Russia (Interviews 1, 2, 6 and 7). The asymmetry inherent within the EAEU is also noticeable for Kazakhstan and Belarus, which have expressed concerns about their subordinate role (Interview 1, 2 and 8).

In terms of their policy goals towards the EAEU, their position is that they should not formally recognize the EAEU, and they are firmly opposed to accepting any offers from both the EAEU and its member states to enter into formal relations with the EAEU (Interviews 1, 2, 6 and 7; EUBusiness, 2015; Rettman, 2015). A formal acceptance of the EAEU would be conditional on a number of issues. The main one is Russia's compliance with the Minsk agreements. It is clear that none of the countries is willing to lend legitimacy to the EAEU as long as Russia fails to implement the Minsk agreements. In addition, even in the (unlikely) case that Russia progresses in this regard, they would remain skeptical about entering into a formal relationship with the EAEU, in particular about the possibility of negotiating a EU-EAEU free trade agreement. Their

³ Examples include the restrictions imposed by Russia on the transit of goods from Ukraine to Kazakhstan through Russia and the Russian ban on agricultural products from the EU.

skepticism is instigated by several factors, including the lack of transparency of the EAEU, the incomplete nature of the customs union and single market, the inconsistency in the implementation of the rules, and Russia's poor track record in terms of compliance with international trade rules, as well as its uncooperative attitude when negotiating trade issues with the EU (Interviews 1, 2, 6 and 7).

Despite their skepticism towards the EAEU, all five countries maintain strong bilateral economic ties with most of the EAEU member states and actively undertake export promotion activities, including in Russia (Interviews 1, 2, 5, 6 and 7). They frequently engage in bilateral business meetings aimed at boosting trade.⁴

Slovakia and the Czech Republic

The second group of countries is also skeptical of Russia's motives behind the EAEU and have doubts about the extent to which the EAEU will become a fully-functioning customs union and single market, but they are more supportive of the EAEU than the first group. Like the first group, Slovakia and the Czech Republic both view the EAEU mainly as a political project, aimed at recreating Russia's dominance in its neighbourhood (Interviews 3 and 4; Lajčák, 2014). They believe that the economic benefits of the EAEU for its member states are limited, and they are cautious about the possible economic success of the EAEU.

Nevertheless, they do not rule out closer engagement with the EAEU. The formal position of the Czech and Slovak governments is 'to wait and see'; as long as the EU imposes sanctions on Russia and the situation in Ukraine does not improve, they will not engage in a formal relationship with the EAEU. But if those circumstances change, they might consider closer cooperation with the EAEU, although they would still remain cautious given their doubts about the possible economic success of the EAEU (Interviews 3 and 4). In particular, the trade ministries, along with business organizations, are interested in closer engagement with the EAEU.⁵ Like the countries of the first group, Slovakia and the Czech Republic maintain strong economic relations with most of the EAEU member states and are seeking to expand their trade relations with them (Interviews 3 and 4).⁶

⁴ For Poland, see e.g. <https://www.cci.by/en/content/18th-good-neighborliness-belarus-%E2%80%93-poland-economic-forum>; <http://buda-koshelevo.gomel-region.by/en/republic-en/view/poland-considers-belarus-as-strategic-partner-in-transport-logistics-13113/>; http://www.paih.gov.pl/20160823/Poland_Kazakhstan_potential_of_cooperation_is_enormous#; <http://www.president.pl/en/news/art,237,presidents-duda-and-nazarbayev-for-development-of-economic-relations.html>; <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/890819/armenia-presents-new-attractiveness-to-polish-investors-ambassador-edgar-ghazaryan%E2%80%99s-interview.html>.

⁵ For instance, in 2016, a group of Slovak business representatives had a meeting with officials from the Eurasian Economic Commission at the headquarters in Moscow, where they expressed an interest in cooperation with the EAEU (Eurasian Economic Commission, 2016a).

⁶ For Slovakia, see e.g. <http://eng.belta.by/politics/view/andreichenko-belarus-ready-to-be-a-gateway-for-slovakia-to-eurasian-economic-union-91092-2016/>.

Hungary and Bulgaria

The third group of countries is most supportive of the EAEU. Hungary, in particular, has openly expressed its support of the EAEU and has actively sought to enter into a formal engagement with it. Bulgaria's support is more ambiguous: while the government supports the EAEU, it is more reluctant to establish a formal relationship with the EAEU.

On numerous occasions, the Hungarian government has shown itself to be supportive of the EAEU and has called for closer interaction with the EAEU (Hungarian government, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d, 2015e, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c). This culminated in 2016 with the conclusion of a Memorandum of Understanding between the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC) and Hungary's Ministry of Rural Development (Eurasian Economic Commission, 2016b). The memorandum "defines the main directions and forms of interaction between the EEC and the Hungarian Ministry of agriculture to increase trade turnover between the countries of the EAEU and Hungary, eliminate barriers in trade, ensure food, veterinary and phytosanitary safety, technical and scientific cooperation and technological development in AIC branches" (Eurasian Economic Commission, 2016b).

Bulgaria is supportive of the EAEU, but compared to Hungary it is less eager to launch a formal relationship with the EAEU at this stage. While there have been bilateral contacts between Bulgaria and the EEC (Eurasian Economic Commission, 2013), and Russia has offered Bulgaria the prospect of closer cooperation with the EAEU (see e.g. TASS, 2014), for the time being, Bulgaria is reluctant to engage more closely with the EAEU (Interview 10). Bulgaria thinks it is too early to enter into formal cooperation with the EAEU: it sees the EAEU as a very young organization and wants to wait and see how it will further evolve (Interview 10). Interestingly, public support in Bulgaria for the EAEU is quite strong. In an opinion poll in 2014 conducted by Alpha Research, 22 per cent of the respondents indicated that they would like their country to join the EAEU (Euractiv, 2014).

Uploading through the EU

The article now moves on to examine to what extent the CEECs seeks to project their views of the EAEU onto the EU level. In doing so, it starts from the assumption that EU member states will seek to project or 'upload' certain national foreign policy objectives onto the EU level because of the possible 'amplifying' effect (Bossuyt, 2017). Bottom-up Europeanization in the area of foreign policy may enable "member states to pursue and even expand foreign policy objectives (in specific regions or with regard to specific themes) beyond those attainable with domestic capabilities" (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2014, p.132). If a state successfully manages to upload a national foreign policy goal onto the EU level, it can rely on budgetary, diplomatic and economic support from the EU institutions and other member states, which allows this national

foreign policy goal to be pursued more intensively and with a higher potential impact (Keukeleire and Delreux 2014, p.132; also see Hill and Wong, 2011, p.222).

While it is generally acknowledged that EU foreign policy is highly subject to the interests of the large member states (in particular, Germany, France and the UK), smaller member states can also leave their mark on the EU's foreign policy and succeed in projecting their interests onto the EU level (Wong and Hill, 2011, p.7; Nasra, 2011; Denca, 2009; Denca, 2013; Pastore, 2013). EU membership allows them to pursue a more ambitious national foreign policy, backed by the EU's political and economic weight and international standing (Denca, 2009; Popescu, 2010). Smaller member states also benefit strongly from the increased access to information and resources, which hugely exceed their own capabilities (Denca, 2009, p.402). As such, new member states, and in particular the smaller countries, tend to perceive EU membership and integration in the field of foreign policy as carrying more benefits than losses.

Based on how active they have been at the EU level on issues concerning the EAEU, again three groups of countries can be distinguished. The first group consists of Poland, Lithuania and Hungary. They have been most vocal at the EU level and have actively sought to upload their views of the EAEU onto the EU level. The second group comprises Latvia, Estonia and Romania. They have been less vocal than the first group but they have actively defended their policy goals towards the EAEU when initiatives at the EU level were launched by others that went against their positions on the EAEU. The third group includes the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Bulgaria. They have been mostly passive and have tended to follow the consensus position reached at the EU. The official position of the EU regarding the EAEU was established in 2012 when preparing for the bi-annual EU-Russia summit. This position was for the last time revised ahead of the last EU-Russia summit in 2013. The position is that technical contacts can be made between the European Commission (DG Enterprise and DG Trade) with the EAEU when and where it is needed for EU business (Interviews 1, 2, 5 and 8). In light of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and the EU sanctions imposed on Russia, it was decided that no formal contacts should be established with the EAEU as long as Russia's commitments under the Minsk agreements are not fulfilled.

Poland, Lithuania and Hungary

The first group of countries has been most active at the EU level. While Poland and Lithuania have been pivotal in resisting any attempts to establish a formal relationship between the EU and the EAEU, Hungary has actively sought to get the EU to enter into a formal relationship with the EAEU. Poland and Lithuania both vehemently want to preserve the current status quo in EU-EAEU contacts, which are limited to technical meetings. The most illustrative example of Poland and Lithuania's uploading attempts is their response to the letter that Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker sent to Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2015, in which he suggested building closer ties between the EU and the EAEU once a ceasefire is implemented in Ukraine. Both Poland and Lithuania reacted furiously to Juncker's letter and actively sought support among

their allies in the EU to ensure that the letter would not be followed up (Interview 2; Euractiv, 2015; Rettman, 2015). By contrast, Hungary is very keen to upgrade the ties between the EU and EAEU and has actively sought to pave the way for a formal relationship between them (Interviews 2, 8 and 11; Hungarian government 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015e, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c)

Latvia, Estonia and Romania

The second group of countries has been less vocal, but they have been quick to defend their interests when attempts were made to get the EU closer to the EAEU. Latvia, Estonia and Romania each are keen to preserve the status quo and have rejected initiatives from other member states, not least Hungary, and Commission President Juncker to cooperate formally with the EAEU (Interviews 1 and 2). They each uphold the position that no rapprochement between the EU and the EAEU should be made as long as Russia does not live up to its commitments under the Minsk agreements. Moreover, given their overall skepticism towards the EAEU, not least Russia's motives behind it (see above), it is unlikely that they will accept the EU to enter into a formal relationship with the EAEU even if the Ukraine crisis is resolved.

Czech Republic, Slovakia and Bulgaria

The third group of countries has been mostly passive, in that it has not actively sought to upload their preferences concerning the EAEU onto the EU. The Czech Republic and Slovakia align themselves with the general EU position, which means that they do not seek any closer engagement with the EAEU as long as Russia does not fulfill its commitment under the Minsk agreements (Interviews 3 and 4). Bulgaria has taken a neutral position at the EU level, and is not taking any action on the EAEA as long as the European Commission does not come with a proposal to change the EU's position (Interview 10). Given its relatively positive perception of the EAEU, Bulgaria is likely to endorse proposals from the European Commission for closer engagement with the EAEU (Interviews 10 and 12). In contrast to their counterparts from most other CEECs, some Bulgarian diplomats are of the opinion that "EU-EAEU economic cooperation could be an important vehicle for de-escalation of tension [between the EU and Russia], moving the focus from confrontation to a search for pragmatic relations" (Interview 12). However, Bulgaria is not actively promoting this view at the EU level (Interview 10).

Explaining divergence

How can we explain not only the CEECs' diverging perceptions of the EAEU, but also the diverging degrees to which they seek to upload their preferences onto the EU? Let us first turn to the question how we can explain why the CEECs' perceptions of the EAEU diverge.

Explaining CEECs' diverging perceptions of the EAEU

Foreign policy-making in the European capitals is still informed by demands of national decision-makers to follow sovereign imperatives in as many areas as possible, both procedurally and in

terms of substance. In this perspective, national foreign policy is thus the result of a reconciliation of sovereign imperatives, which ‘explain the enduring pragmatism and even obstructivism that characterizes many member states’ foreign policy’ (Hadfield et al., 2017).

Moreover, as the EU’s legal competence in the area of foreign policy is still low, EU member states continue to conduct foreign policy issues in parallel to, separately from, or even in opposition to the EU. Based on this conceptualization, member states’ foreign policy should thus be observed across the interface of forces of Europeanization and national imperatives (Hadfield et al., 2017). The extent to which national sovereign imperatives operate in foreign policy is different in all 28 member states and varies on a policy by policy basis (Hadfield et al., 2017).

National preferences and interests of EU member states are shaped by a broad range of factors, including (perceived) size, geography, economy, historical experience, domestic politics, institutional settings – such as coordination of EU policy-making -, external alliances, international developments and perceived national vulnerabilities and weaknesses (Copsey and Haughton, 2009; Bilčík, 2010; Wong and Hill, 2011). As Wong and Hill (2011, p.3) point out, national preferences and interests also ‘reflect a country’s sense of national identity, including its basic values and perceptions of what it stands for in the world’. In the case of the CEECs, national preferences and interests in the area of foreign policy are strongly influenced by the experience of and the security and economic dependencies from the communist and Soviet era, as well as by the political geography of the countries’ historical statehood (Bilčík 2010, p.142; Copsey and Haughton, 2009; Vilpišauskas, 2011).

In explaining why CEECs’ perceptions of the EAEU diverge, these factors thus need to be taken into account. In fact, the divergence of their perceptions is not surprising given the variation that the CEECs display on a number of these preference-shaping factors, including history, geography and economy, and in particular their historical relationship with Russia, their geographical location (border or no border with Russia) and their energy dependence on Russia. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that how they perceive the EAEU appears to be largely in line with their broader attitudes towards Russia. The range of attitudes towards Russia among the CEECs varies from friendly (Hungary and Bulgaria) to pragmatic (Slovakia and the Czech Republic) and openly frosty (Poland, the Baltic states and Romania). A case in point is the sanctions imposed on Russia over the Ukraine crisis, an issue on which more or less the same groups of countries can be distinguished: the third group firmly opposes lifting the sanctions, the first group most vocally supports lifting the sanctions and the second group takes a more pragmatic position (Interviews 8 and 9; ECFR, 2015; ECFR, 2016).⁷

As states of the Soviet bloc, Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria were ideologically, economically and militarily allied with the USSR, as institutionalized, *inter alia*, through their membership of COMECON and the Warsaw Pact. However, their relationship with the USSR was highly asymmetrical and the Soviet regime

⁷ It should be noted that Slovakia openly opposed the sanctions (ECFR, 2015).

sought to keep these satellite states under tight control. This was done on the one hand by keeping the ‘fraternity parties’ and their leaders in the CEECs dependent on the USSR and its Communist Party (CPSU) for their survival, and on the other hand by threatening to intervene militarily in case any opposition to local communist rule erupted (Jones, 1980). Throughout much of the Soviet era, the USSR wanted the communist parties in the CEECs to have the appearance of autonomy but not the reality (Jones, 1980, pp.562-4).

However, relations with the Soviet Union/Russia differed to a significant extent. The CEECs were not equally supportive of the USSR and its communist party, as evidenced by the conflicts between the Soviet regime and various communist parties in Central and Eastern Europe (Jones, 1980). Poland and Romania maintained a troubled relationship with Russia/Soviet Union. Romania held arguably the most dissident position among the CEECs (Jones, 1980, p.568). In Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, reformist factions in the communist parties tried to get more autonomy from the USSR after the economies of their countries started stagnating. In contrast, Bulgaria, as the most faithful ally of the USSR within the COMECON system of states, never challenged Soviet ideology and supremacy (Bozhilova, 2013, p.190).

As Soviet republics, the three Baltic states were under full control of the Soviet Union. However, by being reluctant from the beginning, they managed to obtain some degree of autonomy. Not surprisingly, the Baltic countries were among the first to declare independence from the USSR.

This differentiation continued after the fall of communism and the break-up of the Soviet Union, with most of the CEECs publicly announcing their membership aspirations of the EU and NATO, thereby seeking ‘a return to Europe’ away from their communist and Soviet past. During the 1990s and early 2000s, the foreign policies of most CEECs shared a deep antagonism towards Russia that translated both in their discourse and in the economic bilateral cooperation of these countries with Russia. The countries perceived EU membership as an escape from the Russian sphere of influence and a guarantee of their security (Więclawski, 2011). Only Bulgaria, which traditionally had closer relations with Russia/USSR, did not break its ties with Russia and maintained a constructive relationship.

The CEECs’ hostile relations with Russia in the 1990s gave way to a more favourable engagement from about the mid-2000s on the basis of reciprocal pragmatic relations (Freire, 2012, p.136). Hungary and Slovakia, in particular, developed much more friendly attitudes towards Russia.

In what follows, the divergence in perceptions of the EAEU among the CEECs will be explained by indicating how the preference-shaping factors, and in particular those determining their relationship with and attitude towards Russia, play out differently for each group of countries identified above.

Poland, the Baltic countries and Romania

Poland and the Baltic countries' skepticism about Russia's motives behind the EAEU can easily be linked to their fears of Russia's return to imperial foreign policy. These fears are a reflection of their historical experience during the Soviet era and to some extent also during the period of tsarist Russia's domination over the region (Więclawski, 2011).

Compared to the other Central European member states of the EU (namely Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic), Poland's relationship with Russia is considered to be of a different nature and 'verges on the obsessional' (Dangerfield, 2012, p.970; Pomorska, 2017, p.53). The fundamental differences in security policy together with deep mistrust towards the Russian government among Polish society suggest that Poland is likely to continue to have a confrontational stance towards Russia (Buras and Balcer, 2016). Despite being highly dependent on Russian gas (see Figure 1), the same applies to the Baltic states. Given their history of Soviet occupation and continuing existential concern about national sovereignty (Haukkala et al., 2017, p.27), they are very eager to help defend the sovereignty of the CIS countries, which explains why they are of the opinion that the sovereignty of the EAEU members is under threat in light of Russia's dominance of the EAEU and that Armenia and Kyrgyzstan did not willingly join the EAEU and were instead pressurized by Russia.

Also Romania tends to be critical of Russia's actions in the post-Soviet space. Romania, for instance, has been an outspoken critic of Russia's involvement in Moldovan domestic affairs and of its use of energy prices to manipulate the domestic agenda of other countries. More generally, Romania maintains an unfriendly attitude towards Russia, which reflects a broader distrust among the Romanian public sphere towards Russia (Micu, 2010). Like in the case of Poland and the Baltic countries, this is rooted in a historical legacy of subordination to Russia (Micu, 2013).

Czech Republic and Slovakia

Compared to the first group of countries, the Czech Republic and Slovakia have been building more cooperative relations with Russia in the past two decades (Freire, 2012, pp.135-6; Pomorska, 2017, p.54). This is partly because of their energy dependence on Russia (see Figure 1) and their interest in expanding economic relations (Freire, 2012, p.137; Dangerfield, 2013), but also because anti-Russian views are not as widespread among the public spheres of these two countries as in those other countries.

Slovakia wants to keep close relations with Russia and avoid open confrontation. Hence, it adopts a pragmatic stance on Russia and has a friendly attitude towards Russia. This explains why it firmly opposed EU sanctions on Russia (ECFR, 2015). In the Czech Republic, much more than in Slovakia, the image of the conventional threat from Russia persists among diplomats and politicians (Dangerfield, 2013, p.175) and there remains an anxiety about Russia's neo-imperial ambitions (Koran, 2013, p.57). But these perceptions do not have a decisive influence on bilateral relations with Russia, which instead appear to be more determined by energy and economic

interests. Consequently, the Czech Republic adopts an ambiguous and somewhat neutral stance on Russia. This explains that despite being skeptical about Russia's motives behind the EAEU, it has a relatively pragmatic stance on the EAEU in the sense that it follows the EU's position but does not rule out possible cooperation with the EAEU, especially if this may benefit economic interests.

Hungary and Bulgaria

The third group of countries has the most cooperative and supportive attitude towards Russia. Both Hungary and Bulgaria will seek to avoid confrontation with Russia and focus instead on deepening trade and energy cooperation (Dangerfield, 2013; Bozhilova, 2013). For Hungary, this supportive attitude is relatively recent. The Soviet occupation of Hungary in 1956 firmly cooled off relations with Russia, and it is only from 2002 onwards that Hungary has sought closer cooperation with Russia. Since Viktor Orbán started his second term as a prime minister in 2010, relations have become friendlier than ever (Dangerfield, 2013). The recent rapprochement to Russia is driven by two factors. The first factor is Hungary's energy dependence on Russia, along with the fact that the Hungarian government wants to strengthen – rather than decrease – its cooperation with Russia in this field. The second factor relates to the anti-western course that the Fidesz government is following and its shift towards a more autocratic model of government. The rapprochement to Russia should therefore be seen as a way for the Hungarian government to seek endorsement among a like-minded state for its anti-western rhetoric and its autocratic model of government.

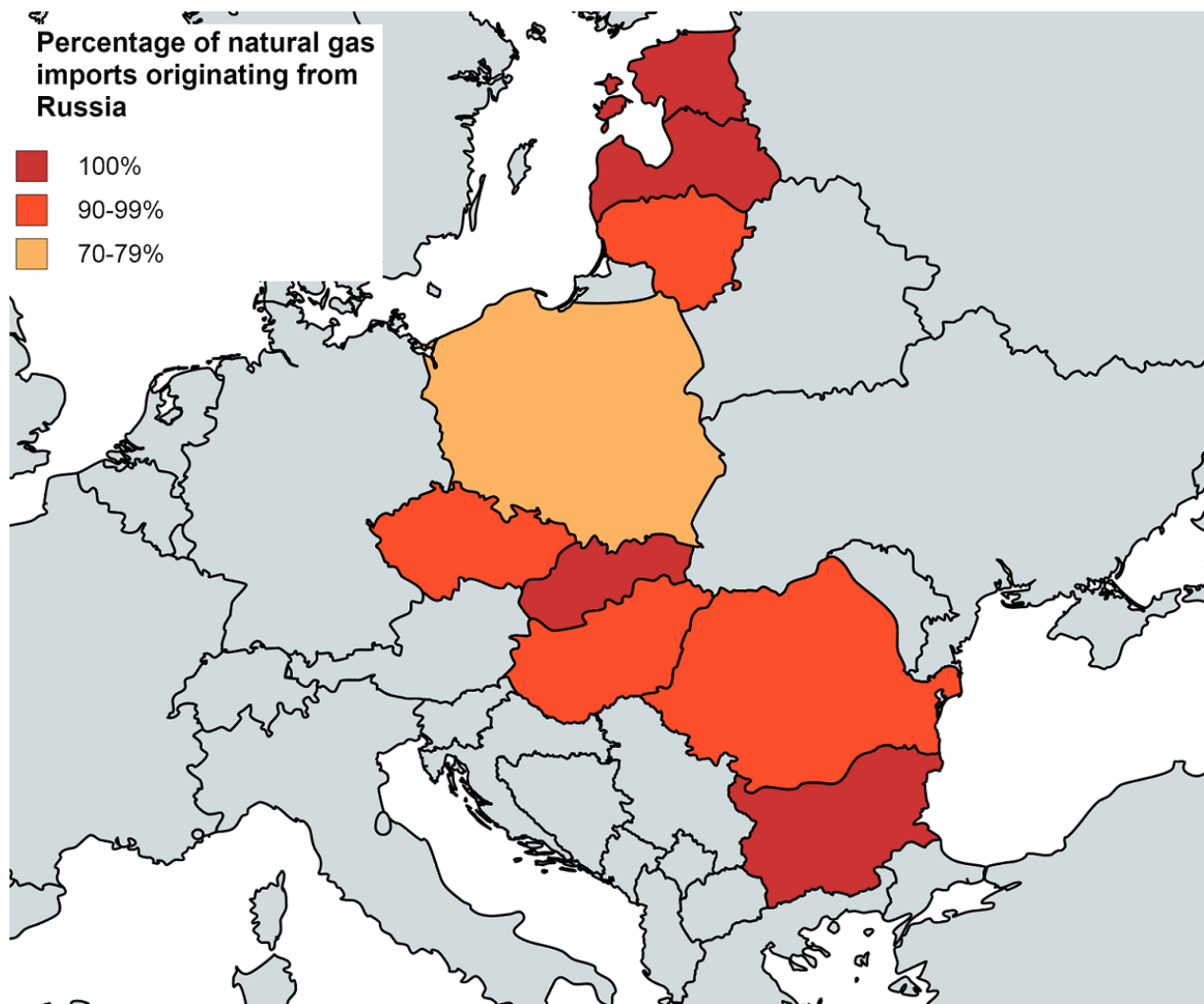
Bulgaria's support for Russia goes back a long way and is rooted in the Russian intervention that led to Bulgaria's autonomy from the Ottoman Empire (Bozhilova, 2013; Ralchev, 2015). Bulgarians also feel ethnically, linguistically and culturally related to the Russians. This partly explains why a significant number of respondents that participated in the opinion poll on the EAEU indicated they wanted their country to join the EAEU. As mentioned above, Bulgaria was the closest ally of the Soviet Union in the COMECON system of states. Today, Bulgaria's supportive attitude towards Russia can also be linked to its strong economic and energy dependence on Russia, which is the highest among all the CEECs. To begin with, Bulgaria relies almost entirely on Russia for its energy supplies. It is fully dependent on Russia for its gas supplies (see Figure 1), but it also has a strong dependence on Russia for oil and nuclear energy (Ralchev, 2015, p.131; Bozhilova, 2013, p.189, p.192). Most of Bulgaria's military equipment is Russian-made and the majority of tourists coming to Bulgaria's Black Sea coast are Russian (Ralchev, 2015, p.131). Moreover, Russian influence is also manifested through “informal business ties connecting powerful circles” and “infiltration of the institutions via corruption of decision-makers and public officials for the sake of business interests” (Ralchev, 2015, p.140).

This strong Russian influence on Bulgaria obviously translates into a supportive attitude towards Russia, but at the same time Bulgaria is also a reliable western partner and is keen to follow the official lines of the EU, even if they may go against Russia's interests (Ralchev, 2015). This

explains why Bulgaria despite having a positive stance on the EAEU prefers not to enter into closer cooperation with the EAEU as long as the EU does not agree to do this.

By contrast, in line with its more confrontational attitude towards the EU, the Hungarian government does not shy away from openly defending Russian interests at the EU and going against the official line of the EU. This explains why Hungary has shown itself so supportive of the EAEU and entered into formal cooperation with the EAEU despite the EU's official position of non-engagement. This is to some extent surprising considering that Hungary's dependence on Russia is in fact less strong than that of Bulgaria. Therefore, much more than is the case for Bulgaria, Hungary's positive perception of the EAEU is politically motivated, in the sense that it is tied to the anti-western course taken by the current government and is likely to change if another government comes to power (Interview 11).

Figure 1: CEECs' dependence on Russian gas



Source: Map developed by author based on data from Eurostat, 'Imports (by country of origin)-gas-annual data' (nrg_124a), available at <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data> [accessed 3 November 2016]

Explaining divergence in uploading

How can we explain the divergence in the extent to which the CEECs have been projecting their views regarding the EAEU onto the EU level? Based on insights from the literature on Europeanization of national foreign policy, a number of conditions can be identified under which EU member states are likely to attempt to project national foreign policy preferences onto the EU level (Bossuyt, 2017). One of those conditions appears helpful here to explain the diverging uploading pattern observed above, namely the perceived importance of a policy goal or issue. EU member states will normally only try to project national preferences onto the EU when these concern issues that they consider very important (Baun and Marek, 2013, p.213, p.218). In other words, if an issue is not considered a policy priority, they will not invest significant effort in trying to influence the EU on that matter. The factors determining the (perceived) importance of a policy issue are of course closely linked to the preference-shaping factors mentioned above.

The analysis has shown that Poland, Lithuania and Hungary have been most active at the EU level and have undertaken most attempts to project their views of the EAEU onto the EU level. Latvia, Estonia and Romania have been less vocal, but they have actively defended their views of the EAEU when initiatives at the EU level were launched by others that went against their positions on the EAEU. The Czech Republic, Slovakia and Bulgaria have been mostly passive and have tended to follow the consensus position reached at the EU.

As we have seen above, for Poland, the relationship with Russia verges on the obsessional. Therefore, ever since joining the EU, Poland has been quite active at the EU level to defend its interests and positions relating to Russia (Pomorska, 2017). Hence, it is no surprise that Poland has been actively uploading its position regarding the EAEU onto the EU level. Also for the Baltic states, Russia remains a priority topic. However, of the three countries, only Lithuania has sought to be among the lead EU member states on Russia (Haukkala et al., 2017, pp.33-34). Whereas Estonia and Latvia see themselves more as support states in EU foreign policy, Lithuania tends to more outspoken and self-assured (Interview 2; Haukkala et al., 2017, pp.33-34). This is in line with the finding that Lithuania has been more actively uploading its views of the EAEU at the EU level than Estonia and Latvia. For Hungary, ensuring closer cooperation with Russia constitutes a top priority, arguably more so than for Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, which would explain why Hungary has been more actively projecting its views of the EAEU onto the EU level. However, the more passive attitude of Bulgaria, Czech Republic and Slovakia can also be explained by the observation that they tend to be support states in EU foreign policy and are keen to follow the consensus position rather than seeking confrontation.

Conclusion

This article explored how the European countries that were part of the Soviet Union or Soviet bloc and are now members of the EU, perceive the EAEU. In addition, it examined whether and to what extent these EU member states try to influence the EU's position on the EAEU and thus

to what extent they try to project their views regarding the EAEU onto the EU level. In doing so, the article started from the assumption that EU member states will seek to project or ‘upload’ certain national foreign policy objectives onto the EU level because of the possible ‘amplifying’ effect. Bottom-up Europeanization in the area of foreign policy may enable EU member states to pursue foreign policy objectives with regard to specific themes beyond those attainable with domestic capabilities

The article found that perceptions of the EAEU among the CEECs vary significantly. Poland, Romania and the three Baltic countries are least supportive of the EAEU, and are very skeptical of Russia’s political intentions behind the EAEU, which they view as a tool of Russian regional hegemony. Slovakia and the Czech Republic are skeptical of Russia’s political intentions, but are interested in economic cooperation with the EAEU. Hungary and Bulgaria are most supportive of the EAEU, and Hungary has even sought closer engagement with it. In explaining why the perceptions differ so strongly, it was argued that the divergence of their perceptions is not surprising given the variation that the CEECs display on a number of preference-shaping factors, including history, geography and economy, and in particular their historical relationship with Russia and their energy dependence on Russia. This becomes even clearer when considering that how they perceive the EAEU is largely in line with their broader attitudes towards Russia.

The article also found that the extent to which the CEECs seek to upload their views of the EAEU onto the EU level diverges. Poland, Lithuania and Hungary have been most vocal at the EU level and have actively sought to upload their views of the EAEU onto the EU level. Latvia, Estonia and Romania have been less vocal, but they have actively defended their views of the EAEU when initiatives at the EU level were launched by others that went against their positions on the EAEU. The Czech Republic, Slovakia and Bulgaria have been mostly passive and have tended to follow the consensus position reached at the EU. The article explained this divergence by referring to one particular condition (drawn from the literature) that determines whether a EU member state will seek to upload its national foreign policy preferences onto the EU level, namely the perceived salience of a policy goal or issue.

Interviews

Interview 1, Estonian officials, 25 May 2016

Interview 2, Latvian official, 27 May 2016

Interview 3, Czech official, 30 May 2016

Interview 4, Slovak official, 22 June 2016

Interview 5, EU official based at the EU Delegation to Russia, 5 July 2016

Interview 6, Lithuanian official, 7 July 2016

Interview 7, Lithuanian MEP, 7 November 2016

Interview 8, DG Trade officials, 21 November 2016

Interview 9, EEAS officials, 25 November 2016

Interview 10, Bulgarian official, 20 July 2017

Interview 11, Hungarian official, 25 July 2017

Interview 12, Bulgarian official, 8 August 2017

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