



Central Europe's Geopolitical Position in the Context of Contemporary Anti-Americanism and Pro-Russian Narratives

Geopolitické postavenie strednej Európy v kontexte súčasného antiamerikanizmu a proruských naratívov

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Abstract:

This article examines Europe's geopolitical position through the prism of Central Europe, with particular attention to the contemporary spread of anti-Americanism and pro-Russian narratives. It argues that Central Europe should be understood not as a fixed or uniform geopolitical actor, but as a historically contingent and strategically contested space situated between Western and Eastern centres of power. Drawing on geopolitical theory and the historical development of the region after the Second World War, the article analyses the conceptual ambiguity of geopolitics, the instability of Central Europe as a political construct, and the persistent competition of major powers over the region. The study further shows that the post-1989 expectation of durable peace and stable integration into Euro-Atlantic structures has been profoundly challenged by Russia's actions in Crimea in 2014 and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. These developments have returned Central Europe to the centre of strategic rivalry. The article concludes that Europe's contemporary geopolitical condition is increasingly shaped by narrative competition, renewed great-power politics, and the vulnerability of Central Europe to external pressure, making the region once again a critical testing ground for the future balance of power in Europe.

Keywords: Geopolitics, Central Europe, anti-Americanism, pro-Russian narratives; security; geostrategy.



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Abstrakt:

Tento článok skúma geopolitické postavenie Európy prostredníctvom prizmy strednej Európy, pričom osobitnú pozornosť venuje súčasnému šíreniu antiamerikanizmu a proruských naratívov. Tvrdí, že strednú Európu nemožno chápať ako pevného alebo jednotného geopolitického aktéra, ale skôr ako historicky podmienený a strategicky sporný priestor nachádzajúci sa medzi západnými a východnými centrami moci. Na základe geopolitickej teórie a historického vývoja regiónu po druhej svetovej vojne článok analyzuje koncepčnú nejednoznačnosť geopolitiky, nestabilitu strednej Európy ako politického konštraktu a pretrvávajúcu konkurenciu veľmocí o tento región. Štúdia ďalej ukazuje, že očakávanie trvalého mieru a stabilnej integrácie do euroatlantických štruktúr po roku 1989 bolo zásadne narušené konaním Ruska na Kryme v roku 2014 a jeho rozsiahlym vpádom na Ukrajinu v roku 2022. Tieto udalosti vrátili strednú Európu späť do centra strategickkej rivality. Článok konštatuje, že súčasné geopolitické podmienky Európy sú čoraz viac formované súťažou naratívov, obnovenou politikou veľmocí a zraniteľnosťou strednej Európy voči vonkajším tlakom, čo robí z regiónu opäť kľúčové skúšobné pole pre budúcu rovnováhu síl v Európe.

Kľúčové slová: Geopolitika, stredná Európa, antiamerikanizmus, proruské naratívy, bezpečnosť, geostratégia.

1. Theoretical and conceptual framework: Central Europe and geopolitics

Europe is geographically defined as a continent and, in conventional geographical classifications, may be divided into Western, Central, and Eastern Europe. From a geopolitical perspective, however, Central Europe constitutes a space that either separates or connects, depending on the analytical perspective adopted, the wider Eurasian region with the rest of the world. Central Europe is therefore best understood as a territorial process rather than a stable geopolitical entity. It has never been, and is unlikely ever to become, a unified geopolitical actor because of the diversity of its ethnic composition, religious traditions, and state interests. The geopolitical subconscious of Central Europe as a divider between East and West has been shaped by the historical expansion of colonialism and by the ambitions of great powers such as Germany, Russia, and later the United States. Central Europe may thus be interpreted on two levels: as a geostrategic space and as a focal point of tension. In the first sense, it is a space in which actors seek to employ power in pursuit of their interests; in the second, it is a kind of geopolitical neuralgic point that influences the behavior of geostrategic actors. Given the scope of this study, and without claiming exhaustiveness, the region is examined primarily in the context of developments after the Second World War.

The study of geopolitics has evolved alongside the dynamic development of human society, particularly under the influence of globalization, which has heightened interest in understanding political processes, the distribution of power, and the movement of political actors across space (Kazanský and Ivančík, 2016). No universally accepted definition exists, as the term remains inherently vague and interpreted differently across disciplines: politicians, political scientists, geographers, military professionals, security analysts, and scholars of international relations all approach the concept from distinct perspectives (Ištók, Terem, Čajková, and Rýsová 2010). Early foundational work by Mackinder (1904) emphasized the decisive role of geography in shaping political power, foreign policy, and strategic relations,

establishing the classical geopolitical framework in which spatial factors are central to international relations. Building on these foundations, Gray (1999) conceptualized geopolitics more comprehensively, arguing that it examines spatial relations and their influence on both domestic and foreign policy objectives. Contemporary scholarship has expanded these interpretations further - Agnew (2003) highlights the political construction and interpretation of space, and Cohen (2003) emphasizes the structural and global dimensions of geopolitical relations, underscoring the dynamic interplay between regions and centers of power. Dodds (2014) reinforces the notion of ambiguity and flexibility, noting the concept's varied application across analytical and practical contexts. Geopolitics thus performs both cognitive and methodological functions, enabling the analysis of political phenomena at global, continental, and regional levels (Volner, 2004), and providing a framework for understanding the exercise of power, the geopolitical potential of state actors, and the structuring of political objectives in space (Ištók, 2004, 2011). Taken together, these perspectives illustrate that geopolitics is an interdisciplinary, conceptually complex field encompassing both material and discursive dimensions of power, in which spatial relations are not only observed but also interpreted, constructed, and contested.

2. Central Europe in geopolitical perspective: between historical legacy and contemporary strategic narratives

Historically, Europe has been a continent in which decisive geopolitical centers of power shifted from the Mediterranean to north-western Europe. These shifts were accompanied by conflicts through which geopolitical actors were formed in three major periods: the formation of nation-states following the Peace of Westphalia, the post-First World War settlement shaped by the Treaty of Versailles, and the post-Maastricht period (Duleba, Dudinská, Cirner et al. 2018). The last two decades have been particularly significant for the region for two principal reasons. First, the enlargement of NATO expanded the military-political alliance into the Balkans and towards the Baltic borders of the former Soviet Union. Second, the 2004 enlargement of the European Union deepened the economic and integrative reach of the EU, later followed by the accession of Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia (Šabíc and Drulák, 2012).

It is a territory that has historically served as a space for the projection of geopolitical interests by major actors. After the First World War, many Central European states were incorporated into a sanitary cordon between the newly established Soviet Union and Western Europe. After the Second World War, the formation of the two antagonistic blocs of East and West transformed parts of the region into satellites of the Eastern bloc or expected front-line zones. A stable Central Europe is therefore more an idea than an empirical reality, owing to geographical heterogeneity, power asymmetries, and divergent intellectual and spiritual orientations (Gurňák, Blažík, and Máriássyová, 2014). Geographically, Central Europe stretches across the western part of the Eurasian landmass. These geographical conditions help explain why Central Europe has historically been vulnerable to invasion and relatively difficult to defend. In his conception of the relationship between the islands and the Heartland, Mackinder emphasised that the Baltic Sea and Central Europe were strategic spaces for access to the maritime world (Kosinski and Parizkova, 2017).

Its central position in modern geopolitics was especially determined after the First World War, while during the Cold War this space witnessed a growing concentration of military power (Púčik 2020). The term Central Europe refers to a historically constituted region whose borders change in accordance with prevailing geopolitical conditions (Hloušek, 2007).

In the interest of European stability, Mackinder proposed the creation of a sanitary zone separating Germany and Russia. In practice, however, the opposite occurred. Central Europe thus resembled Cohen's shatterbelt more than Mackinder's sanitary cordon (Kučerová, 2020).

Geostrategic interests in Central Europe have remained present and arguably more intense than before, as illustrated by Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its military aggression against Ukraine in 2022 (Šabíc and Drulák, 2012).

In the present era, Central Europe is more accurately characterised as a shatterbelt than as a stable sphere of influence. Kelly (1986, 165) defines a shatterbelt as a geographically defined region characterized by intense strategic competition among major powers, where internal fragmentation, political instability, and external intervention intersect, making such areas particularly prone to conflict and geopolitical rivalry. This is reinforced by the presence of major actors such as China, Russia, and the United States (Brix and Busek, 2021).

Moldicz (2023) highlighted the importance of Central Europe in two major epochs, noting that the post-1990 transformation created asymmetrical dependence on the West. Such expectations proved unfounded, as demonstrated by Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. The war returned the United States to Central Europe on a larger scale and intensified strategic competition among major powers. The regional security environment increasingly approaches a condition of disorder rather than sustainable security. While Russia offers limited long-term attractiveness, the United States provides a broader package of cooperation (Moldicz, 2023).

In the contemporary context, Central Europe's geopolitical position cannot be understood solely through classical strategic categories, but must also be considered in relation to competing geopolitical narratives, particularly anti-American and pro-Russian discourses circulating within the European information space.

3. Analysis of anti-american and pro-russian narratives in the context of Central Europe

In today's geopolitical environment, anti-American and pro-Russian narratives have become an important part of strategic competition in Central Europe. If Central Europe is understood as a historically contested and strategically exposed space, then anti-American and pro-Russian narratives should be seen not as peripheral discursive phenomena, but as an integral part of contemporary geopolitical competition. This is particularly important in the context of the present article, since the geopolitical position of Europe is shaped not only by territorial, military, and economic factors, but also by struggles over interpretation, legitimacy, and political identity. In this sense,

narratives do not merely accompany geopolitics; they actively structure the political environment in which geopolitical choices are understood and justified.

In today's geopolitical environment, anti-American and pro-Russian narratives have become an important part of strategic competition in Central Europe. Their influence does not lie only in what they say explicitly, but also in how they shape public perceptions of security, legitimacy, sovereignty, and political belonging. In a region historically situated between competing centers of power, narrative contestation is especially effective because it speaks directly to long-standing questions of identity, dependence, and strategic orientation.

In the Central European context, anti-American narratives usually rest on several recurring claims. The United States is portrayed as an external hegemonic actor that instrumentalises Europe in pursuit of its own strategic objectives. NATO enlargement, the military presence of the United States in Europe, missile defense infrastructure, and support for Ukraine are often framed within this logic as evidence that Washington treats Europe less as a sovereign partner than as a strategic platform. Such narratives present the United States as a source of escalation in relations with Russia and describe Euro-Atlantic security arrangements as mechanisms that reduce the strategic autonomy of European states. The result is not merely criticism of specific American policies, but a broader delegitimisation of the Atlantic order itself.

Anti-American narratives in Central Europe usually revolve around several recurring themes. The United States is often portrayed as an external hegemon that uses Europe, and particularly NATO, to advance its own strategic interests. Within this frame, the American presence is presented not as a guarantee of stability, but as a source of escalation, especially in relations with Russia. Such discourse also tends to depict Euro-Atlantic integration as a form of political dependency that limits national sovereignty and weakens the ability of European states to pursue an autonomous foreign policy. In this sense, anti-Americanism in the region is not simply criticism of particular U.S. decisions, more often, it functions as a broader challenge to the legitimacy of the Atlantic security order itself.

At the same time, pro-Russian narratives offer a competing interpretation of European security and regional order. Within this discursive frame, Russia is presented as a legitimate great power whose actions are primarily reactive and defensive, especially in response to the post-Cold War expansion of Western political and military structures. This type of argument often draws on themes of cultural conservatism, civilizational pluralism, state sovereignty, and criticism of liberal universalism. In parts of Central Europe, such narratives may also resonate with historical memories of disappointment with Western powers, dissatisfaction with the uneven outcomes of post-1989 transformation, or the perception that European integration has not benefited all societies equally.

Pro-Russian narratives work in a related, though not identical, way. They typically present Russia as a misunderstood or unfairly marginalized great power, and as a legitimate actor in the European security space. In this interpretive framework, Russian actions are frequently described as defensive responses to Western expansion, rather than as assertive or revisionist policies. These narratives gain additional strength when they draw on themes such as cultural conservatism, Slavic affinity, energy interdependence, or disappointment with liberal internationalism (Shekhovtsov, 2018).

In parts of Central Europe, they also resonate with the older idea that the region should serve as a bridge between East and West rather than remain firmly anchored in Euro-Atlantic institutions (Shekhovtsov, 2018).

The analytical importance of these narratives lies in the fact that they are mutually reinforcing. Anti-American discourse weakens trust in the United States, NATO, and the wider West, while pro-Russian discourse simultaneously offers an alternative model of political order in which Russia appears as a stabilizing, or at least understandable, actor. Their combined effect is to reopen the question of Central Europe's strategic orientation. This is especially significant in a region that, after 1989, was often assumed to have definitively, returned to the West. The re-emergence of these narratives suggests that such a return was politically consequential, but never intellectually or socially irreversible.

What makes these two narrative streams particularly important is the way they reinforce one another. Anti-American messages weaken trust in the United States, NATO, and the broader West, while pro-Russian messages offer an alternative geopolitical interpretation in which Russia appears more reasonable, more traditional, or more respectful of sovereignty. Together, they create a discursive environment in which strategic ambiguity can again appear attractive. This is especially significant in Central Europe, where the post-1989 belief that the region's geopolitical orientation had been definitively settled has proven far less stable than many expected.

This problem is particularly visible in Central Europe because the region has long existed in a condition of structural ambiguity. Central Europe has historically functioned more often as an object of external geopolitical interests than as a coherent geopolitical subject in its own right. That structural condition helps explain why narrative contestation finds fertile ground there. In a region repeatedly shaped by German, Russian, Soviet, and later American influence, questions of who protects, dominates, manipulates, or truly represents Central European interests remain politically sensitive. Anti-American and pro-Russian narratives gain traction precisely because they insert themselves into these unresolved historical sensitivities.

The persistence of such narratives is closely connected to the historical and political structure of the region itself. Central Europe has often struggled to act as a fully coherent geopolitical subject; more often, it has been shaped by the influence of stronger external actors. This structural condition creates fertile ground for competing interpretations of who protects the region, who threatens it, and who truly represents its interests. Where dissatisfaction exists with the social, economic, or normative consequences of post-Cold War transformation, anti-American and pro-Russian narratives can find a receptive audience (Radnitz, 2022). Their appeal becomes even stronger when they intersect with distrust of political elites, scepticism towards European institutions, or broader cultural anxieties.

The issue has become even more pronounced since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. These events not only transformed the hard-security environment of Europe, but also intensified the struggle over political meaning. On the one hand, support for Ukraine and the renewed military presence of the United States in the region strengthened the Atlantic dimension of Central European security. On the other hand, these same developments created conditions in which anti-American narratives could portray the region as a hostage of

external confrontation, while pro-Russian narratives could represent Russia as a power reacting to Western encroachment. What emerges, therefore, is not simply an informational conflict, but a deeper contest over the legitimacy of Europe's present security architecture.

From a geopolitical perspective, these narratives should therefore be understood not merely as opinions, but as instruments of influence (Lucas & Pomerantsev, 2016). They contribute to the reshaping of the strategic environment by redefining how alliances, threats, and political loyalties are understood. In this sense, narrative power becomes part of geopolitical practice itself. The struggle over Central Europe is not taking place only through military deployments, diplomatic initiatives, or economic pressure, but also through competing stories about order, identity, and legitimacy (Lucas & Pomerantsev, 2016).

From this perspective, anti-American and pro-Russian narratives should be analysed as instruments of geopolitical influence rather than as isolated opinions or marginal propaganda themes. They shape the cognitive environment in which policy choices are interpreted by political elites, media actors, and wider publics (Radnitz, 2022). They can weaken social consensus on alliances, relativize responsibility for aggression, and reduce the capacity of states to formulate coherent strategic responses. In that sense, narrative power becomes part of geopolitical practice itself. Central Europe's vulnerability is therefore not only territorial or military, but also interpretive.

This suggests that resistance to anti-American and pro-Russian narratives cannot rely solely on military deterrence or formal alliance membership. It also requires a resilient public sphere, a credible culture of strategic communication, and a clearer political understanding of Central Europe's place in Europe. Without these elements, the region remains vulnerable not only to external pressure, but also to internal fragmentation in the way it understands its own security and political future.

For this reason, any study of Europe's geopolitical position should include a more explicit account of narrative competition. If Central Europe today increasingly resembles a shatterbelt rather than a stable sphere of influence, then anti-American and pro-Russian narratives are among the mechanisms through which that instability is reproduced in the political imagination of the region. They do not create geopolitical tensions on their own, but they deepen them by eroding clarity about allies, threats, and the normative foundations of European security.

The analysis of these narratives should therefore be considered a significant component of the article's argument, though its relative weight may vary depending on the broader empirical and theoretical context.

4. Conclusion

Europe's geopolitical position cannot be fully understood without close attention to Central Europe as a contested and strategically exposed region. Rather than functioning as a coherent geopolitical actor, Central Europe has historically served as an arena in which stronger powers project influence, pursue competing interests, and negotiate spheres of control. The persistence of anti-American and pro-Russian narratives in parts of Europe illustrates that contemporary geopolitical competition extends beyond military, economic, and institutional arenas to encompass struggles

over legitimacy, interpretation, and political identity. The post-Cold War expectation that Euro-Atlantic integration had resolved the region's security dilemmas has been fundamentally challenged by Russia's annexation of Crimea and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. As such, Central Europe has re-emerged as a shatterbelt where the strategic interests of the United States, Russia, China, Germany, and the European Union converge. Although a detailed analysis of these narratives lies beyond the scope of this article, their existence underscores a crucial avenue for future research into how discursive frameworks shape regional perceptions and influence strategic decision-making.

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