

THE RETURN OF CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN “SHATTERBELT” AND THE VISEGRAD GROUP WITHIN WESTERN STRATEGY FOR RUSSIA’S CONTAINMENT

Daniel Santos Kosinski¹

Nikola Parizkova²

ABSTRACT

Eastern Europe is an exceptionally troubled region since Antiquity, with a history characterized by large-scale migrations, wars, invasions and occupations by foreign powers. Therefore, long ago it has been considered by theorists such as Mackinder, Spykman, Brezinski, Cohen and Kelly as a region of transition and attrition between the dominance of Atlantic naval and Eurasian land powers, strategically important for access and control of the Heartland. This makes it a shatterbelt, an area sorely disputed by nations which project their powers and influence, imposing themselves over local peoples. The Visegrad Group, formed by Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary in 1991 after the end of neo-Stalinist regimes, sought successfully accession to Euro-Atlantic institutions – NATO and EU, primarily. Recently, following the resumption of Russian “activism” and its military interventions in Georgia and Ukraine, the Visegrad Group has become western hegemony’s major instrument of advance in the area, articulating policies of encirclement and restraint of Russia. The mounting of military forces by both sides in the area perceived in the last year points to points to the deepening of tensions in the shatterbelt – which had lost intensity since the 1980’s – characterizing a process of still unforeseeable outcome.

Key words: Geopolitics. Visegrad Group. NATO. Russia

¹ Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), Rio de Janeiro - RJ, Brasil. danskos@gmail.com

² Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), Rio de Janeiro - RJ, Brasil. nik.parizkova@gmail.com

GEOGRAPHIC CONDITIONS AND GEOPOLITICAL FORMULATIONS OF CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE³: THE SHATTERBELT CONCEPT

Located in the western part of the great Eurasian landmass, Central and Eastern Europe is in the intermediate zone in between the Atlantic accesses of Western Europe and the vast steppes of Central Asia. Topographically, it is characterized by the predominance of two great plains: the Hungarian and the North European ones, being this last one a part of the Great European Plain, which extends itself to the Ural Mountains, in Russia. Within this vast territory are few natural obstacles, such as mountain chains; the ones located there do not stand out due to its extension or the height of its peaks. Nonetheless, its area is crossed by rivers such as the Danube, Vistula, Bug, and Dnieper, which are important routes of communication and movement that allow people to access the plains through the Baltic, Black and Adriatic (Mediterranean) seas.

Thus, these geographical conditions make the region prone to invasions and hard to be defended, and very susceptible to the immigration flows from Asia. That was the case of the Huns who, in the fifth century, contributed to the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, as well as the case of the invasions by the Mongol hordes, in the 13th century. On the other hand, since the 16th century, the area has virtually not experienced a period in which it was strongly disputed by local or close power centers, a fact that seems to have defined the region's own political geography, historically characterized by the multiplicity of sovereign entities of small territorial and demographic dimensions coexisting in a compressed environment.

From the geopolitical point of view⁴, many theories developed

³ There is no consensus regarding the precise borders of the European central and eastern regions. The United Nations bodies consider "Eastern Europe" the whole area located in the east of Germany, Austria, Italy, except for the three Baltic States. Other definitions, however, based on linguistic, political and religious criteria, consider, as part of the "Central Europe", the Slavic countries predominantly catholic religion, besides Hungary. During the Cold War, all the countries belonging to the Soviet influence sphere were considered as belonging to the "Eastern Europe", that means even the German Democratic Republic. Intending to avoid such inaccuracies, we chose to use the term "Central and Eastern Europe" as referring to the area located between Germany and Russia, and the Baltic, Black and Adriatic Seas.

⁴ We do not consider geopolitics a determining variable, but a strategical aspect that is part of the motives for specific political actions. Geopolitics are a construct of human thinking that presents scenarios, contexts, or conditions that may or may not be used by political agents. There is, thus, no kind of geographical determinism in history: geography requires

during the 20th century represented attempts to understand such striking characteristic. Generally, they consider Central and Eastern Europe a turbulent region of competitive pressure. It is thus described, for example, by the British Halford Mackinder, who, in its classical article entitled *The Geographical Pivot of History*, from 1904, presented the "Heartland Theory", considering Central Asia as the biggest natural stronghold on Earth, an area whose control was considered essential by him for the supremacy in Eurasia (called by him of World Island), and emphasized the Baltic sea and Central Europe as strategical areas for accessing its inlands (Moniz Bandeira, 2014, p. 29-30).

A few decades later, the Dutch and American denizen Nicholas Spykman added to his view the basic principles presented by Mackinder. However, unlike his predecessor, he considered the so-called Rimland – the intermediate area between Central Asia and the "marginal seas" (the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian oceans) – strategically more important than the Heartland itself, understanding Central Europe as a part of a vast "buffer" between the naval and terrestrial powers. Thus, it was characterized as a conflict or dispute zone between both powers, and it was the responsibility of the Americans to command the naval one to control the coastal stripe around Eurasia, exerting the control and restraint of the Soviet Union. (Moniz Bandeira, 2014, p. 32).

Due to that, Spykman was considered one of the mentors on the North American policy regarding the Soviet Union during the Cold War, a perspective also adopted by the Polish, and also American denizen, Zbginiew Brzezinski, to whom, the foreign policy of the Jimmy Carter government (1977-1981) should aim at blocking Soviet access to the Indian sea and destabilizing the opposing superpower by promoting the rebellion of its Islamic subjects in Central Asia, as the Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, and Tadjiks (Moniz Bandeira, p. 34-37).

Besides these general remarks, the concept of shatterbelt is the one that best corresponds to the specific characteristics of Central and Eastern Europe. The concept's elaboration is closely connected to the geopolitical North American and Soviet movements in the dispute for the supremacy

a political interpretation. It always requires a political insertion, that is, the formulation of a speech or vision of power. By itself, the territory is a static tool and only when the will of agents is exerted upon it, it is turned into a part of a specific geopolitical project. Thus, we consider geopolitics as a strategical and normative knowledge that assesses and redesigns its own geography based on a specific, defensive or expansive, vision of power (Fiori, p. 141).

over this part of Europe, although it has been employed for other disputed areas during the Cold War, such as the Asian Southeast, Middle-East, and parts of Africa. Therefore, according to the definition by Saul B. Cohen (2008, p. 48), the shatterbelts, as one of the most important aspects of contemporary geopolitics, are “[...] strategically oriented regions that are both deeply divided internally and caught up in the competition between great powers of the geostrategic realms”.

Likewise, for Philip Kelly (1997, p. 33), shatterbelts are

“[...] regions in which two strategically important countries compete for control, with a resulting two-tiered structure of interrelated regional and strategic conflict. Shatterbelts pose a danger of escalation, of wars that might spread elsewhere, and of smaller countries’ prompting serious confrontation between their larger, strategically important sponsors”.

For this view, Central and Eastern Europe is considered “the belt of political change in Europe” (Unstead, 1923), having as historical characteristics, linguistic and cultural fragmentation, social and political instability, low productive development when compared to the more developed countries in Western Europe, military deficiency and vulnerability in relation to neighboring and more powerful powers. Effectively, this is what a brief investigation of its past seems to indicate.

BRIEF HISTORICAL DIGRESSION ABOUT CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

In the last two centuries, the history of Central and Eastern Europe has been, with few exceptions, the one of subjection and occupation by foreign powers. During the whole 19th century, it has been disputed and dominated by Austria (-Hungary, after 1867), Prussia (German Empire, after 1871), czarist Russia and Ottoman Turkey, which have subordinated the multiple peoples living there.

After World War I – which started as a central European or Balkan conflict, with the declaration of war by Austria-Hungary against Serbia -, along with the defeat and dissolution of said empires, states such as Poland,

Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia and Romania were instituted by several international treaties. However, with the relative exception of the union between Czechs and Slovaks, these countries had multiethnic characteristics in which the political boundaries often did not meet the linguistic and cultural ones, resulting on little legitimate governments for considerable shares of its populations. There was also the presence, in most of them, of significant German minorities, resentful about the defeat and the loss of territory of favor of the new States. These facts, added to its great productive and military weakness, made them much more socially and politically unstable (Hobsbawn, 1995).

With the Nazi rise to power in Germany in 1933 and the evocation of the "living space" ideology (Lebensraum) of the supposed "Arian race" to be conquered in the East, the Czechoslovakians were the first ones, with the annexation of the Sudetes in 1938, to be the target of foreign aggression in their areas, which occurred with the agreement of the British and French, supposedly their allies, to the Munich Agreement of 1938. Nonetheless, in the following August, Nazis and Soviets defined the bases for the new division and reoccupation of Central and Eastern Europe, by signing the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (Vodička; Cabada, 2003), almost right after which happened the double invasion and dissolution of Poland in September and October of 1939 (Zamoyski, 2009).

After this, with the invasion of the Soviet Union by the Nazis in July 1941, almost all Central and Eastern Europe was under their command during the following three years, a period when they perpetrated the biggest outrages of the war – if not of the whole history –, resulting in millions of murders and the extermination of almost 20% of the Polish population (Zamoyski, 2009). However, with the Soviet counterattack and the advance of the Red Army until the taking of Berlin, the army occupied Budapest and Warsaw, in February, and Prague, in May. This meant that Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia were freed from the Nazi domain by the Soviets, which implied, above all, the substitution of a foreign occupier by another. The Soviets, through many tools – such as rigged elections, and fusing and closing rival parties to the communists –, installed in these countries governments of Stalinist aspirations (Arantes Jr., 2015) subordinated to their control due to the ostensible presence of Soviet forces in these territories⁵.

⁵ The Soviet, and later Russian, troops have only left Poland in 1993. Therefore, they have been on Polish territory intermittently for 54 years, since the invasion in 1939. In the case of

Thus, for Hungarians, Polish, and Czechoslovakians, the following decades were characterized by the subordination of their governments, on many levels, to the Soviet impositions, despite of the “de-Stalinization” announced by Leonid Khrushchev in the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the USSR, in 1956⁶. Overall, any attempt of “relaxation” of the regimen occasionally suggested by their governments was seen by the Soviets as an unacceptable deviation of their policy line and a threat to the “cohesion” of the Socialist Bloc. Governments that proposed regime reforms, as the ones by Imre Nagy in Hungary and by Aleksander Dubček in Czechoslovakia (Balík, 2011), were invaded by the Warsaw Pact troops (1956 and 1968, respectively), commanded by the Soviets, and overthrown (Nagy was also executed). That was a principle reaffirmed by Leonid Brezhnev in the “Brezhnev Doctrine”, which claimed that the Soviet Union had the “right” to interfere in any socialist country where supposed “reactionary forces” were steering back to capitalism.

Such submission scenario lingered without bigger changes until when, in the mid-80s, many factors helped to transform it, such as: the election of the conservative Polish cardinal Karol Wojtila for the Papacy in 1978 and his recurrent anti-communist preaching as Pope John Paul II in the countries of that region (Fiori, 2007); the creation, in 1980, and rise of the independent union *Solidarność* (“Solidarity”) in Poland, led by Lech Walesa (Zamoyski, 2009); the weakening of the Soviet Union military, technological, productive, and financial power during that decade, besides the loss of the Red Army prestige, which was defeated in Afghanistan (Medeiros, 2008); Mikahail Gorbachev’s rise to power in the country, who proposed unsuccessful liberal and decentralizing reforms on the political institution and production infrastructure, and did not support the repression of governments against liberal opposition in their

Czechoslovakia, they left the country in 1945, but returned to suppress the Prague Spring in 1968 and then only left the country in 1991. As for Hungary, after its invasion in order to crush the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the government of János Kádár consented on signing a treaty that formalized the permanent presence of Soviet forces in its territory aiming to avoiding the right’s return to power (Arantes Jr., 2015, p. 330).

⁶ An initiative that, according to Arantes Jr. (2015, p. 268), did not result on the denounce of effective transformation of the Stalinist principles, but on the reformulation of the called “neo-Stalinism”. Its decisive characteristic was the maintenance of the contradiction between State property of the means of production and private appropriation of the largest and best share of its product by the nomenklatura, that is, the party/governmental bureaucracy.

satellite countries and rejected the use of military forces in order to keep the Soviet status quo in Central and Eastern Europe (Arantes Jr., 2015); and the rise of many liberal movements opposing to the regimes in the region's countries, which were led by segments of civil society and supported by western ideological and material resources, among which, the most known was the "Civic Forum" in Czechoslovakia, that had activities that resulted on the "Velvet Revolution" (Pařizková, 2016).

As a result, between 1989 and 1991, all countries of Central and Eastern Europe had elections that were considered "free" by the western watchers, which meant an end for the neo-Stalinist regimes and their substitution for liberal representative institutions, considered "democratic" ones. In Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, new liberal leading elites were constituted, although, in many cases, their member were old leaders and employees of the nomenklatura of the collapsing regimes (Arantes Jr., 2015). These governments, commanded by specialists familiar to the means of trade and to the Western financial institutions (Arantes Jr., 2015, p. 37), began the "liberalizing reforms" under the auspices of foreign governments, especially the United States one, and of bodies as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, promoting the substitution of the production activities' centralized planning, a characteristic of the neo-Stalinist model, for the "market economy" (řik, 1990).

Therefore, despite the many difficulties after the collapse of neo-Stalinist regimes and the wide gap regarding material wealth and rate of standard of living they had in relation to Western Europe, in the beginning of the 90s, the governments of those countries could, for the first time in more than half century, define the course of their foreign affairs without many embarrassments. To prevent new direct subordination to any foreign power started to be considered the main goal of their foreign and productive, financial and military development policies, to which, integrating Euro-Atlantic institutions, due to their stability and power, was seen as the most reasonable strategy (Arantes Jr. 2015). Moreover, understanding that they shared heritage and destinations, and had common goals, expressed in the founding declaration of the Visegrad Group, showed, for their leading elites, the path of joining

forces in a process of regional integration.

VISEGRAD GROUP'S CONSTITUTION AND GOALS: INTEGRATION TO THE TRANSATLANTIC ALLIANCES AND A TOOL FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF "WESTERN HEGEMONY"

The Visegrad Group is an organization constituted by Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary (hereinafter, V4). It was created in the 15th of February of 1991, during a meeting of the government leaders of the, at the time, three neighboring countries⁷, which took place in the small Hungarian village of Visegrad, chosen for having been the place of the historical meeting of the kings of Bohemia, Hungary and Poland in 1335 (Kugiel, 2016).

Considering the whole geopolitical and historical context mentioned, one can understand the content of the goal established in the short "Visegrad Declaration", the founding document of V4, whose title already points out the main purpose for its constitution: "Declaration on cooperation between the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Hungary in striving for European integration". It affirms that "the similarity of the situation that has evolved over the past decades has determined for these three countries convergent basic objectives", which would be: the "full restitution of state independence, democracy and freedom"; the "elimination of all existing social, economic and spiritual aspects of the totalitarian system"; the "construction of a parliamentary democracy, a modern State of Law, respect for human rights and freedoms"; the "creation of a modern free market economy"; and the "full involvement in the European political and economic system, as well as the system of security and legislation" (Visegrad, 1991)⁸.

A little more than a decade after its foundation, its four members were able to coordinate the collective, and reasonably fast, entrance in the main supranational western institutions. Hungary, Poland and Czech Republic joined NATO in 1999 – Slovakia did the same in 2004 –, entering the territory directly submitted to the influence of the North American

⁷ Given that the Czech Republic and Slovakia used to constitute the Czechoslovakia, which was later divided.

⁸ The Groups presentation affirms that "*Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia have always been part of a single civilization sharing cultural and intellectual values and common roots in diverse religious traditions, which they wish to preserve and further strengthen*".

military apparatus. Previously, they had already joined the Council of Europe (in 1990, 1991 and 1993, respectively), a first stage for the entrance in the European Union. Regarding the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the Czechs have joined it in 1995, Hungarian and Polish in 1996, and the Slovaks in 2000. Eventually, the four countries joined together the European Union in 2004, being also important to remind that Slovakia also adopted the Euro in 2009. This quick process enabled the conditions for institutional and political stability that allowed the countries to considerably expand their productive activities (Holman, 2005)⁹ and to quickly join the western European production, trade, and financial circuits, becoming, specially, a privileged area of expansion for private German capital, reaching material wealth much higher than anything experienced during the neo-Stalinist regimes (Arantes Jr, 2015).

Having said that, 25 years after its creation, V4 had a considerable success in achieving its first goals. However, it is necessary to highlight that this did not happen only due to their government interests, given that its integration was also an essential piece in the advancement of "western hegemony" all over the Central and Eastern Europe (Arantes Jr., 2015, p. 416)¹⁰. Effectively, it was clear, especially for German leaders as the chancellor Helmut Kohl, that it was necessary to integrate those countries to Europe in order to enable their material development, given that the reunified Germany could not guarantee its security and stability having impoverished

⁹ The Czech Republic, a country of solid and old industrial tradition, quickly recovered its industry after the crisis that followed the end of "real socialism". Currently, many of the biggest companies in Central Europe are Czech companies, operating in activities such as energy generation and distribution, petrochemistry, logistics, and transportation, besides old and well-known groups, as the automobile company Škoda (despite being under the foreign private control of the Volkswagen Group). Poland had also been showing high rates of production growth – it was the only European country that managed to avoid a recession since the 2008 global crisis – and of consolidating its very diverse industrialization, although it is historically less advanced than the Czech one. The country had in 2014 the eighth highest gross domestic product of the European Union and the 23rd in the whole world. Lastly, Hungary and Slovakia have been standing out as important logistic and high technology industry and services centers, being used as forwards bases by many foreign companies, which have been installed in their capitals.

¹⁰ Eastern hegemony has, as distinctive traces, the concentration of power concerning foreign affairs in the hands of a group comprised by North America, Western Europe and Japan, under the utmost leadership of the United States; the dissolution – in ideological terms – of such dominance, under the shape of evocating the role of international agencies, among which is the UN; and the search for legitimacy on the concepts of freedom, democracy and protection to the human rights. Traditional concepts of legal equality among States, sovereignty and non-intervention have been put in the background in the western discourse.

and politically instable countries in its eastern borders (Marsh, 1995).

However, the United States government, and not the European ones, was the main promoter agent of such advancement. This happened because, during the 90s and 2000s, the strategists of the Bill Clinton and George W. Bush governments considered essential to take advantage of the lack of power in the area, caused by the great fragility of the post-Soviet Russia governed by Boris Yeltsin, to occupy that region through extending the western institutions' hegemony towards it, wherever and however possible. Thus, the leaders of many European countries frequently expressed caution in this advancement, since they did not wish to shaken their relationship with the Russians – with whom they have considerable commercial relations and on whom they depend significantly for their energy supply (Moniz Bandeira, 2014, p. 111) –, the same feeling was not expressed by the Americans, who, despite the end of communism and of the Soviet Union, continued to consider Russia its main opponent in the control of Eurasia. Using the terrorist attacks of the 11th of September of 2001 and the following war against the Taliban in Afghanistan as justifications, the Americans signed agreements for the implementation of air bases in countries such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, imposing its direct military presence in the former Soviet Turkestan, the core of the Central Asia Heartland (Moniz Bandeira, 2014, p. 65, 91-92).

Moreover, the American have pushed strongly the NATO expansion towards the Central and Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia, incorporating former Soviet satellites and possessions, as the Baltic countries, or creating programs of military cooperation for performing collective exercises, aiming to integrate them later to the alliance (Moniz Bandeira, 2014, p. 91)¹¹. That was the main reason for which the V4 countries, among others, joined the transatlantic military alliance before entering the European Union.

Actually, the American efforts in ending Russian influence was so big during those years that the western advance even through direct military interventions, causing human and wide material losses (Arantes Jr., 2015, p. 433). That is what happened during the NATO attacks, led by

¹¹ The United States had constituted the NATO's Partnership for Peace Program for the former Soviet republics, performing collective military exercises in the area since 1997. All countries in the Central Asia became members of the NATO's North American Co-operation Council. And, in 1999, the Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Moldavia were included in a military structure aiming to create a real alternative for the Commonwealth of Independent States, led by Russia, as a first step for integrating these countries to NATO.

American forces, to Serbia in 1999, aiming to overthrow the then president Slobodan Milošević, using the justification of protecting the human rights of the Albanese minority in Kosovo. American policy has come to the point of even fragmenting that country by occupying it and then breaking up parts of its territory in administrative and "peace missions" under the UN command, promoting the independence of Montenegro and Kosovo (Arantes Jr., 2015, p. 434-437), which are, since then, microstates ensured by western institutions¹². This did not happen per chance, especially when considered that, for centuries, Serbia has been Russian ally in the Balkans, if not in the whole Central and Eastern Europe.

Thus, it is necessary to consider how much have the formation of the Visegrad Group and the achievement of its preliminary goals also been reflections of the policies by the euro-transatlantic alliances, led by the United States, which intended to extend their institutions towards Central and Eastern Europe, aiming to "siege" Russia (Moniz Bandeira, 2014, p. 97), taking advantage of its huge frailty after the USSR collapsed. Therefore, if on one hand the V4 leading elites intended to strengthen and modernize their states after the fall of the neo-Stalinist regimes, on the other hand, they have chosen to give a considerable share of their sovereignty in favor of entering the western institutions of political, financial, and military integration, which are more stable, associating (or, on the other hand, subordinating) themselves to them and also contributing to the reintroduction of western hegemony in the region (Arantes, 2015, p. 321).

RUSSIAN REACTION TO WESTERN HEGEMONY ADVANCEMENT

Since he took office as the president of the Russian Federation, in the 7th of May of 2000, Vladimir Putin has strived essentially to restructure (or recover) Russian heritage and productive, financial and military capacities, which were heavily destroyed during the years prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union and during Boris Yeltsin's government, especially due to the "financial catastrophe" caused by the country's

¹² Both states use the Euro, the common currency of the European Union. Moreover, these acts happened in spite of the UN Security Council Resolution 1244, from 1999, which established a commitment to Serbia's territorial integrity and affirmed that Kosovo's political state would be decided by a political agreement (Moniz Bandeira, 2014, p. 112). Furthermore, Montenegro has also recently joined NATO, in the 5th of June of 2017.

bankruptcy crisis in 1998 (Moniz Bandeira, 2014, p. 110). He has, then, led many reforms aiming to perform a strategy of power centralization in which the independent doctrine of military security, the autonomy in relation to the United States and a bigger market control were the most evident traces (Medeiros, 2008, p. 245), at the same time he successfully suppressed the separatist aspirations of regions as Chechnya.

Nonetheless, Putin has commanded a wide process of reorganization of the property and exploration relations of the country's many energy resources by renationalizing companies as Gazprom, Lukoil and Yukos, making the so-called "oligarchs" to subordinate themselves to his project of recovering State power, taking on leading roles in the infrastructure recovery and reactivation of the country's industrial production, including the devastated military-industrial complex (Medeiros, 2008, p. 249). Propelled by the significant growth in oil and gas prices in the 2000s, Putin's strategy managed, in a few years, to multiply the gross domestic product, the per capita income, and the State's tax collection. Regarding the foreign affairs, he started to use State control over these resources as tools for protecting Russia's power projection, specially aiming to recover the influence and to pressure former Soviet possession, as Ukraine, who depended on Russian energy supplies, but also in Russia's relationships with the European Union, a main consumer of these resources.

Thus, after the mid-2000s, Putin started to constantly demonstrate that he considered that Russia was already organized and capable enough to retake the assertiveness in its foreign affairs. With that, it has recovered its traditional position of "player state" in the "big power game" in Eurasia (Moniz Bandeira, 2014, p. 111).

Then, in the beginning of 2007, George W. Bush's government made public some proposals for establishing anti-missile bases in Poland and Czech Republic, and it proposed joining NATO to Ukraine and Georgia. If that happened, the United States and the western powers would achieve a huge geostrategic advantage, encircling Russia with a powerful military structure, by arming Ukrainian and Georgian forces and NATO bases in their borders (Moniz Bandeira, 2014, p. 113). As a reaction to this, Putin declared that the United States had surpassed their national borders in all segments, warning against the expansion of the transatlantic alliance, an organization that was reinforcing its presence in Russian borders. Lastly, he also affirmed that, by doing so, the United States would throw the

world into an abyss of permanent conflict (Moniz Bandeira, 2014, p. 111).

Since the Bill Clinton government, US intelligence authorities have designed policies aiming to turn Georgia into a pivot of the new Russia restraint policy, preventing it from dominating the Caucasus region again. At the end of 2001, the newly elected president Eduard Shevardnadze visited Washington, D.C., where he requested economic and military help, signed a strategic partnership treaty with NATO (although Russia still had three military bases in the country), and authorized the installation of an important oil pipeline crossing the Georgian territory, enabling the flow of the energy production in the Caspian Sea through the Turkish Ceyhan harbor, towards the West (Moniz Bandeira, 2014, p. 94).

However, due to serious financial problems, that government became unstable and extremely unpopular, resulting on many opposition demonstrations. Thus, in November 2003, with the victory of the "Rose Revolution" – planned and coordinated by Washington (Moniz Bandeira, 2014, p. 94) –, an openly pro-West government was implemented by Mikhail Saakashvili, a lawyer graduated in the United States. He determined the closure of a Russian military base and signed a treaty for military cooperation and equipment supply with American government and private companies.

In 2005, George W. Bush visited the country, when his government was already performing two military help programs: the Georgia Train and Equip Program and the Georgia Security and Stability Operations Program (Moniz Bandeira, 2014, p. 95). As the diplomatic and military relationship between both countries were strengthened, in July 2008, the Americans coordinated, in Georgian territory, a military exercise called Immediate Response, in which they trained the local forces, as well as the ones from Azerbaijan, Armenia and Ukraine, all former Soviet republics. Once more, Russian reaction came in the words by the Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov, who alleged that those initiatives represented a real threat to Russian peace and security, which could put the area at the edge of a new armed conflict, of unpredictable consequences (Moniz Bandeira, 2014, p. 114).

Given that, a few weeks later, in the 8th of August 2008, Putin's subordinate and political successor, Dmitry Medvedev, who had just assumed the position of president of Russia, commanded the beginning of a military intervention in Georgia, using as a justification the defense of the autonomy in the separatist regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia,

which had their invasions planned by Saakashvili and agreed to by the US government. In just five days, the Russian forces completely occupied both regions and imposed a grave defeat to the Georgians, while their western allies did not do more than to adopt “symbolic measures” against the Russian and send humanitarian help.

Thus, “for the first time since the disappearance of the Soviet Union”, Russia had decided to confront the advance of the western siege towards its borders through a “decisive military intervention” on one of its closest allies (Moniz Bandeira, 2014, p. 64). For that moment on, the governments by Medvedev and Putin took over the strategical initiative in the Caucasus, ordering many strategical operations and training its armed forces. In addition, they also had other initiatives that express “shows of force” against the West, significantly increasing the military budget, reinforcing Russian navy presence in the Atlantic and Mediterranean, expanding their navy bases in the Black Sea and in the Tartus, in Syria, besides reactivating the patrol flights for strategical bombing, they had been interrupted since 1992 (Moniz Bandeira, 2014, p. 116).

In Ukraine, the Western hegemony advancement movements happened similarly to the ones in Georgia, although, on this case, American action has been reinforced by a stronger European interest in integrating it to the European Union. The country, which has many territorial, demographic and natural resources, the “grain basket” and second most important republic of the former Soviet Union, is located precisely between Russia and the eastern borders of NATO, the reasons why it has a great geostrategic meaning for the United States in their siege policy (Moniz Bandeira, 2014, p. 98).

Therefore, just as in Georgia, in Ukraine the Americans have supported the “Orange Revolution”, in 2004, with many material and ideological resources, which caused the election defeat of Viktor Yanukovich, a candidate of the then president Leonid Kuchma, the target of great popular dissatisfaction, in favor of Viktor Yushchenko, who supported the country’s alignment to Euro-Atlantic institutions (Moniz Bandeira, 2014, p. 96). However, this government failed to guarantee stable governability bases and, not having achieved his integration goals, Yushchenko received only 5% of the votes in the 2010 elections, which were won by Yanukovich, born in the east of Ukraine that has a mostly Russian population, who defended strengthening the relations with Russia.

Therefore, since then, it has happened a serious aggravation of the

dispute for control and influence over the country's destinations between the supporters of two antagonist groups, a pro-West one, which is the majority in western and northern provinces, and a pro-Russia one, which is predominant in the south and east provinces, both supported by many resources given by their foreign sponsors. Nonetheless, in February 2014, a storm of demonstrations outbroke in many regions of the country, opposing to Yanukovych's government, which had, in the previous December, signed a billionaire agreement for energy and financial aid with Vladimir Putin's government, as a response to the pressure for not signing the agreement with the European Union that failed to happen after Yanukovych refused to meet the requirement of freeing political opposites. This conflict caused the so-called 2014 "Ukrainian Revolution", which resulted on a violent government repression against the demonstrators (with more the 100 deaths) and the deposition of Yanukovych in February 22 by the votes of more than 2/3 of the Ukrainian congressmen, in a process had speed and procedures out of the constitutional norms. However, facing the threat of losing the most important country in the strategical Russian surrounding areas for the western influence sphere, in March, Putin decided to use military means again, occupying and annexing (without international recognition) the Crimean Peninsula and supporting politically and logistically the secessionist movements in the east of Ukraine, as the self-proclaimed popular republics of Donetsk and Luhansk combated by the Ukrainian government forces. Then, the on-going civil war in the east of Ukraine, or the "War in Donbass", which has already caused almost 10,000 deaths, among civilians, soldiers, and rebels, and, according to estimations, has resulted on more the 2,000 displaced people.

Effectively, the military interventions in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine in 2014 showed that, after 20 years of non-direct intervention on the Central and Eastern European affairs – be it due to a seeming "option", was done by Gorbachev, or due to weakness and submission, as during the Yeltsin government –, Russia, under the control of Putin and Medvedev, regained material, military and political conditions of going back to the "big game" of disputing hegemony in Eurasia. Thus, the passivity previously showed in face of the western hegemony and Euro-Atlantic institutions' advancements over former Soviet satellites and republics has been replaced by the resumption of Russian "activism" in the region through many means, including the use of military forces.

Due to this significant shift in the region's political scenario, we

proposed to investigate the hypothesis of the recent aggravation of the Central and Eastern European “shatterbelt” and also to analyze the shift in the Visegrad Group’s policies and goals.

THE VISEGRAD GROUP AS THE NEW PIVOTAL ELEMENT OF WESTERN RUSSIAN RESTRAINT POLICY

The “Bratislava Declaration”, released in a commemorative meeting celebrating V4’s 20th anniversary in 2001, has updated the goals expressed in the foundation letter. Considering that the goals of political and economic integration to Europe had already been achieved, it emphasized the concerns about the member-State’s security. Besides reinforcing the full support to the continuation of the European Union and NATO’s expansion process for the Balkans, the document affirms the need “to support and advocate the fostering of Euro-Atlantic links, including development of close strategic complementarities between NATO and the European Union, which is considered essential for the long-term security of our countries and the entire Euro-Atlantic area”, and that “the current international environment poses increasingly complex challenges of a universal nature which go far beyond the means of individual countries”, mentioning as threats the illegal immigration, drug and people trafficking, among others that had arbitrary definitions, such as “terrorism” and “extremism” (The Bratislava..., 2011, p. 1-2).

However, given the further development of the Ukrainian crisis and after the Russians annexed Crimea, in the main declaration published in 2015, V4 talked about what it perceives as threats to its countries coming mainly from the “east”, explicitly mentioning Russia, besides also mentioning issues related to the entrance of large amounts of immigrants in Europe:

The security environment of Europe is dynamic and unpredictable, with threats growing in EU’s imminent neighborhood and beyond. In the East, more than a year after the illegal annexation of Crimea, Russia continues to violate international law, undermining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, and pose a challenge for the European Union and the security of its member states. In the

South, a belt of weak and destabilized states now stretches from North Africa [...] to Iraq and Yemen, creating an environment conducive to challenges like unprecedented migration flows. In this context, we underline the necessity of a balanced and inclusive approach, addressing threats and challenges that the EU faces both in the East and the South (Bratislava, 2015).

Thus, these governments have also started to pressure more openly the expansion of western institutions to the east, aiming to incorporate countries in the close Russian strategical surroundings. Therefore, in May 2016, they promoted a meeting in Prague with their ministers of foreign affairs and representatives of the Eastern Partnership countries – created by EU authorities in 2009, aiming to stablish privileged relationships with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldavia, and Ukraine, all former Soviet republics – of EU bodies responsible for its expansion and of the Swedish, Dutch and German governments.

In the declaration produced then, they reaffirmed “their strong support to the Eastern Partnership as a strategic dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy”, welcoming the “renewed focus” necessary for its consolidation and reinforcement. They also have declared support to the realization of reforms that “strengthen the internal stability and resilience of partners”, considered as the basis for a cooperation based on “common values, mutual interests and commitments as well as the free will, respect for the sovereignty and independence of all parties, and not directed against anyone”. However, they have also highlighted “the need to react strategically for the consequences of the present challenging geopolitical context” in the region.

Directly mentioning Georgia, Moldavia and Ukraine, the V4 governments have affirmed to consider “key tasks” to implement association and free trade agreements with these countries, offering their support to the necessary reforms, and that “fulfilment of the related conditions brings these countries gradually closer to the European Union [...]”. In addition, they also affirmed wishing to stablish cooperation relations in a “wide spectrum of areas to increase the resilience of the partner countries and their ability to withstand internal and external pressures, thereby contributing to the stability of the region”. They have also emphasized the necessity of

keeping “inclusiveness” in the program, allowing Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus to opt for establishing individual relations with the EU. Besides that, they also repeated they believe that “the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia represents a violation of international law and a challenge to the European security”, reclaiming the “full implementation” of the immediate ceasefire established by the recently signed Minsk Agreement and the peaceful resolution of the Ukrainian conflict “in accordance with international law”. Lastly, they have reaffirmed V4 governments’ support for “Ukraine’s unity, sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity” (Joint..., 2016, p. 1).

In September 2016, after the meeting of the four V4 prime ministers with the Ukrainian prime minister, Volodymyr Groysman, the V4 declared having “reiterated their strong support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine and confirmed the policy of non-recognition of the illegal annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation”, also emphasizing their support to the ceasefire declared then in the Donbass region, calling “all sides to abide by it and restrain from actions which destabilize the situation in the region”. Moreover, they have expressed their “strong support for prompt finalization of the process of ratification of the Association Agreement, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, between the European Union and Ukraine”, highlighting the cooperation programs among the respective governments “towards building a modern state in Ukraine, based on stable and transparent institutions” (Communiqué..., 2016).

Nonetheless, after a meeting of the V4 prime ministers about the European Council meeting held in Brussels in December 2016, a new declaration by the group referred to the “key challenges which the EU needs to face”. Then, considering the “migratory pressures” as a security issue to be “resisted effectively” by the “full control of external borders” of the block, the declaration defended the “close cooperation of the EU and NATO” as “vital to enhance the Common Security and Defence Policy and the security of Europe”, also praising the progress on the implementation of the EU-NATO Joint Declaration, which “provides for measures to advance the practical cooperation of the two organisations”. They have also reaffirmed the support to a quick full application of the association and free trade agreement with Ukraine, an “important element of the Eastern Partnership policy, which the Visegrad countries consider as a strategic dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy” (Joint...,

2016a, p. 1).

Lastly, in the declaration published by the group in March 2017, after a meeting of their ministers of defense, the V4 governments agreed "to fully implement the NATO Warsaw Summit decisions, including on the strengthening of the Eastern Flank". Then, they have "re-confirmed the importance of the enhanced Forward Presence for the more effective deterrence and defence" of the military alliance; discussing the contribution of their military forces to the "Assurance Measures for the Baltic States" adopted by NATO for 2017, with its implementation, among others, in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, besides reaffirming the V4 countries' compromise in keeping the security of these States, former Soviet republics; agreeing to the establishment of a Multinational Division North East headquarters in the Polish city of Elblag – close to the borders of the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad and to the so-called "Suwalki gap", a narrow land access that connects Poland and Lithuania pressed by the Russian and Belarussian territories, considered as the weakest point of the whole NATO eastern borders –, destined to "strengthen NATO effectiveness in undertaking collective defence tasks on the Eastern Flank"; they have also emphasized the recent implementation of the US Armored Brigade Combat Team in Poland as important "for ensuring the security of the entire region and the strength of the transatlantic link"; and finally, they have expressed their "support for the further development of the EU Common Security and Defence Policy", agreeing that it should address the "security challenges of all the EU members in an effective manner" at the same time it strengthens NATO (Joint..., 2017, p. 1).

THE AGGRAVATION OF TENSION IN THE "SHATTERBELT"

Effectively, some facts reflect the growing tension in all Central and Eastern Europe and its strategical surroundings, especially in the Baltic sea, indicating the rearmament in the region and causing concern regarding the possible "overflow" of the Ukrainian conflict. We consider that they signal the aggravation of disputes in the old "shatterbelt", which had decreased significantly in the last two decades.

In June 2016, military authorities from Germany and Poland, who met at the German city of Rostock, announced an unprecedented program of cooperation between their navy forces based on establishing a common "Submarine Operations Authority". This agency, subordinate

to the German Maritime Operations Center, has the aim of performing the operational control over the whole navy fleets of both countries – six German and five Polish ones –, performing operations mostly in the Baltic sea. It aims to strengthen the compromise of promoting mutual security between German and Poland, which began in 1999, after an agreement for security-related information protection and sharing and was continued multilaterally by the participation of both countries in NATO. The Russian government reaction was immediate. The country's minister of defense, Sergei Shoigu, criticized the agreement, alleging it was an "unnecessary provocation" and affirming that the progressive expansion of NATO positions towards Russia was undermining European strategical stability, forcing the country to take what he called "retaliation measures" (Kosinski, 2016b, p. 4-5).

In October, Russian Armed Forces deployed Iskander missile batteries for the military basis in the Kaliningrad exclave. They can reach a radius of about 500 kilometers, allowing the country to bomb capitals such as Warsaw, Vilnius, Riga and Copenhagen, besides Berlin and Stockholm surroundings. According to declarations of the Russian government, it was a "routine operation" that was followed by an American recognition satellite. However, the movement was detected by authorities of the Polish Ministry of Defense, which considered it "highly concerning" (Kosinski, 2016a, p. 4-5).

In January 2017, a bulletproof American brigade was installed in the city of Zagan, in west Poland, where it shall be located until the end of 2017. The convoy, comprised by 24 bulletproof Humvee vehicles and ten trucks, comprises one of the biggest American forces mobilization in Europe since the end of Cold War, according to information from the France-Presse Agency. In April of the same year, another contingent of American military forces arrived in the country. This movement represents only the first transportation of American soldiers and heavy military material for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe within the scope of the Atlantic Resolve operation, commanded by Barack Obama in his last days in office. Altogether, the operation will comprise more than 3,000 American soldiers, hundreds of tanks and heavy weapons, which will be installed also in other countries as Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria¹³. The Russian government, through declarations

¹³ Negotiations for the installation of American troops, military equipment and systems and missiles in countries as Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary were ongoing

by its spokesman, affirmed to consider the dislocation of military forces a threat to it, especially for being a third country reinforcing its military presence in Russian borders, despite not even being an European country. While the Russian vice-chancellor, Alexei Mechkov, said that the dislocation is a factor to destabilize European security (Kosinski, p. 4-5).

In the beginning of March of the same year, it was announced the creation of the first military unified command of the European Union. Named as Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC), it will have its headquarters in Brussels, in Belgium, and it immediately started to operate, in the first moment coordinating European missions in Africa. Although it still represents a preliminary step, far from the creation of common armed forces or military commands fully centralized for the EU, the creation of MPCC highlights the advancements it has been achieving on the implementation of its global defense and security policies. It is possible to point out elements that figure as responsible for the quickness in which recently, in opposition to what happened during decades, the common plans for EU defense and military strategy have been put to action: Trump's election and the uncertainties concerning the US political commitment to European defense through NATO; the civil war in Syria, its, and other countries like Libya and Iraq's, fragmentation and the refugee's mass immigration to Europe; and, specially, the concern about Russian advancements in the East (Kosinski, 2017c, p. 5).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article, we aimed to investigate the geopolitical and historical conditions of the countries belonging to the Visegrad Group, reasons that we considered as leading their governments to create it in 1991, as soon as they could exert their sovereignty in foreign affairs with some freedom. We have mentioned, mainly, the exceptional strategical

unsuccessfully since the George W. Bush government. Barack Obama's decision of authorizing troop and material's deployment indicates his clear disposition in compromising Donald Trump with the maintenance of the American security apparatus in the region. This happened because, during the last presidential campaign, Trump declared in many occasions his disposition in restraining American participation in the defense of European countries to bigger financial contributions to NATO. Besides that, he has also expressed being close to Putin, in the exact moment when the Central European governments fear the resumption of what they consider the Russian "activism" in the region.

conditions of the Central and Eastern Europe in the dispute for hegemony in Eurasia and the recurrent wars and foreign occupations imposed by the great military powers located around it, specially Germany (until World War II) and Russia. Furthermore, it can be identified, in V4's declarations, that perceiving these conditions and fearing the possible repetition in the future led these governments to favor a quick integration to Euro-Atlantic political and military institutions identified to the Western hegemony, which have also, by their mediation, advanced significantly in Eurasia during the twenty years of visible Russian weakness.

For the Russian perspective, it is possible to suppose that this advancement has been interpreted as a threat to its strategical security and a clear dispute for the influence and control over the areas that the Russians have historically considered essential to their security, wealth and – finally – their country's prestige. The Ukrainian case is surely the most extreme one, given that, besides its resources' great strategical significance, it is the country considered as the cradle of Russian national identity¹⁴. Thus, this scenario started to change when, in the mid-2000s, Vladimir Putin managed to recover the political, material and military conditions so that Russian could retake its active role in the foreign relations and in the Central and Eastern European, and in general of all Eurasian, geopolitical organization.

Due to that, the aggravation of the dispute for the influence and control over the areas around Russia, with occasional breaking points in Georgia and Ukraine, which had the role of main battlefield, thrown into an on-going civil war that, up to now, has resulted on the loss of its territorial integrity.

Therefore, already integrated to the Euro-Atlantic security apparatus, V4 countries, through their declarations and foreign policies in the last few years, have made their position clear by defending the European Union and NATO's expansion towards East, extending them to the Eastern Europe, Balkans and Caucasus. Effectively, it is a clear support to Western policy, led by the United States, which aims to encircle and restrain Russia, given that the countries mentioned in the "Eastern Partnership" were former member of the dismembered Soviet Union and share borders with Russia. It is the same case of the Baltic countries,

¹⁴ In the Middle Ages, the first organized power center of Russian language and culture sources was Rus of Kiev, and the evangelization of Russian tribes and principalities was promoter from the territory where Ukraine is today.

also former Soviet republics, which joined the Euro-Atlantic alliances in 2004, when Vladimir Putin's government thought Russia was not well-prepared to resist Western expansion towards its borders. Currently, those countries' territories are used as forward bases for the implementation of NATO's military forces, the closest ones to Russian territory.

Thus, the events of the last two years point out an intense arms aggravation, specially in the area around the Baltic sea, clearly indicating tension aggravation. A document released by the Polish Ministry of Defense in May 2017 also seems to point out this scenario, named "The Concept of Defence of the Republic of Poland", it affirms that the current scenario in the region has been causing the greatest impacts on the countries' security "since the fall of the Soviet Union", consisting on "more and more dramatic changes, not only political, but also economic, social and cultural in their nature" (Rzeczpospolita Polska, 2017, p. 5). In addition, it mentions that "the scale of threats resulting from the Russian aggressive policy", for the Polish government "had not been adequately assessed in the past" (Rzeczpospolita Polska, 2017, p. 6), the document indicates Poland expects to face 15 years of growing tension with Russia, pointing out the need for creating collective military units with V4 countries and expanding the Polish Armed Forces' operational numbers for the first time since 1987, aiming at "adequately preparing Poland to defend its own territory" and enabling the country to "enhance our role in NATO and to serve as the unifying force of all Allied activities on the eastern flank (Rzeczpospolita Polska, 2017, p. 13). Such clear preparation of Polish government for war represents another sign of the return of the Central and Eastern Europe shatterbelt, which can have completely unpredictable future developments.

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