

New Threat Perceptions: The case of the former Soviet bloc and Yugoslavia

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Are there any *common* characteristics of threat perceptions in the case of *all* the post-communist countries? It seems quite obvious that they could hardly be addressed -both analytically and politically- as a certain entity where the participants share similar concerns and face similar challenges. Even in the past this approach required some serious qualifications -not only in the case of non-aligned Yugoslavia but also with respect to specific problems of practically all the Warsaw Pact countries. However, a number of major domestic and international parameters did minimize the differences and provided a certain common ground for security perceptions of all those states.

The situation has certainly changed in the most radical way. Since 1989 all the major sources of “commonality” have disappeared. The post-communist countries have no longer a common interest in protecting the domestic assets of “real socialism”, such as the ideological monism, political preponderance of the party-based nomenclature, rejection of private ownership and non-market economic mechanisms. As the regional international actors, they do not have any longer to operate under “Big Brother's” vigilant control and to proceed from the assumption that the Soviet Union is undoubtedly the most significant military factor in the area. and to level of the global international system, the political and security constraints of bipolarity have also become a fact history.

Moreover, the list of the international actors in the geopolitical space of the former Soviet bloc has undergone (and is still undergoing) the most fundamental changes as well.

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For many of the “newcomers” the very problem of threat perception goes far beyond its traditional meaning since their viability remains unclear. This makes the whole picture even more complex and any generalizations even less appropriate.

Apart from that, in many cases the whole issue of threat perceptions is becoming more inward-oriented. Domestic sources of instability might play much more substantial role than the external ones. It seems important to differentiate between these two sets of destabilizing factors -whatever their interconnection might be.

By and large, there are serious grounds to believe that a new model of threat perceptions has to emerge -the one based on the individual assessment of the security problems and means to address them. The war in former Yugoslavia could have much more serious implications for Budapest than for Warsaw; the problem of ethnic minorities that could be “patronized” from outside is much less sensitive for Prague than for Sofia; a would-be other post-communist capitals. In other words, threat perceptions in the post-communist space vary in a very broad spectrum; a common denominator is not always identifiable analytically and might be even less “transferable” into practical policy.

However, some security related aspects of the post-communist developments have a transnational character. More specifically, it seems possible to identify the following three dimensions of the problem.

a. The post-communist societies are in a painful *process of transition* from one type of economic and political system to another one. The stresses of transition are predominantly domestic, but could be linked directly or indirectly with serious problems in relations with the external environment.

b. The collapse of quite a number of the existing states (Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia) has resulted in an *emergence of new entities* -inheriting the legacy of the past and searching for a new identity. The on-going process of state-formation is deeply affected by the conflict-generating factors contributing to threat perceptions.

c. All the post-communist states have to search their place in the international arena; moreover, it is quite clear that their future role and status will be substantially affected by political and other assets they can acquire now, when the old international system has collapsed and a new one is in the making. This provides a specific rationale for threat perceptions in the light of the *changing geopolitical landscape*, affecting available strategic options and alliance-building dilemmas.

All three sources of new threat perceptions in the post-communist countries deserve careful analysis.

CHALLENGES OF TRANSITIONAL PERIOD

The task of creating a democratic system on the ruins of totalitarian regime and replacing the centrally controlled economy by market mechanisms represents a formidable challenge for all the post-communist societies. The very notion of “threat” is being reassessed during this transitional phase in the most fundamental way. Moreover, a certain period of political and intellectual confusion is inevitable since the basic values, assumptions, norms, patterns of behaviour undergo radical transformations; what was perceived just recently as threatening is no longer a matter of concerns, and viceversa.

The most dangerous and socially the most expensive scenario of transition to post-communism could have been a civil war-like in Russia in 1918-1920. By and large, this scenario has fortunately (and somehow unexpectedly) been avoided -mainly because the viability of the old system turned out practically non-existent. In fact, large-scale violence because of the basic political orientations took place only in two post-Soviet states: Georgia and Tadjikistan. As far as dramatic developments in former Yugoslavia are concerned, they could hardly be attributed to a civil war pattern as a predominant characteristic.

Another broadly and traditionally discussed threat-related issue presupposed that the transition could be substantially affected (either in positive or in negative way) from outside. But in the framework of Gorbachev's foreign policy, all its incoherences and illusions notwithstanding, a possibility of “fraternal aid” to the Warsaw Pact countries in order to “protect the achievements of socialism” was gradually decreasing -to be reduced to a zero level with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The latter event has also made irrelevant an option of the “centre's” repressions against ideological betrayal of peripheries.

However, the very process of transition to post-communist societies is still fraught with a whole number of destabilizing consequences -both domestically and in terms of interaction with the external environment.

Restoring private ownership as the basic element of social system is the process which is certainly unprecedented in scope. Moreover, it is much more controversial than the destruction of the private ownership at the outset of the “socialist era”. The initial accumulation of private capitals, if carried out with flagrant violation of legal norms, moral considerations and democratic aspirations, could bring about a large-scale frustration of the population and seriously discredit the whole process of getting rid of the communist system. This pattern is actually emerging in Russia; though the phenomenon is still a marginal one (as was clearly demonstrated by the referendum in Russia in April 1993), the growing nostalgia with respect to the “old times” could affect the whole political spectrum generating a certain “alienation” both from the western-type values and from the West in general.

Restructuring economy in the process of overcoming predominant state ownership and hyper-centralized system of economic management is a much more conflict-generating phenomenon. Mass unemployment will inevitably increase the social

explosiveness in the society creating a more fertile ground for populist political trends and hostility towards the external environment -which might substantially affect the assessment of security requirements.

A special problem is represented by the preponderance of military-industrial complex in such countries as Russia and Ukraine. On the one hand, this is an extremely complicating factor of economic transformations in general. On the other hand, threat perceptions could be seriously distorted because of the politically influential lobby of military-industrial complex.

The slow development of democratic political structures is one more element of domestic instability affecting threat perceptions. When the competing forces do not operate in an established political framework and seek to consolidate their power at any price, the whole issue of security and foreign policy becomes a stake in the domestic struggle. Once again, Russia gives a striking example of this interaction, when vigorous power fighting under conditions of constitutional chaos contributed to introducing some neo-imperialist syndromes into Moscow's foreign policy.

By and large, overcoming "real socialism" has not become an issue of international conflicts, and a 1956/1968-type scenario turned out impossible. However, the process develops painfully and creates dangerous domestic instabilities. Moreover, serious economic and social problems of the transitional period make the emerging democratic political structures extremely vulnerable and might substantially increase the political support with respect to extremist and nationalist trends.

STATE-FORMATION AND THREAT PERCEPTIONS

The decomposition of the post-communist states is the most substantial factor affecting the threat perceptions in the eastern part of Europe. Analytically, the following dimensions of the problem could be highlighted -taking into account, however, that they all are closely interrelated.

a) *Disintegration*. In principle, preserving integrity is among the vital concerns of any state; anything undermining its integrity might be considered as a threat requiring (and justifying) the most serious political and even military counter-measures. In reality, the post-communist developments have differed from this theoretical assumption and has followed three major patterns in terms of relations between "the center" and secessionist peripheries.

The best case scenario (that is, the most "civilized" one and the least fraught with conflicts) has been demonstrated by Czechoslovakia where Prague refrained from any attempts to prevent disintegration. In a sense, the latter was even stimulated by "the centre" declining any compromises with Bratislava. However, such a model seems quite uncommon and will hardly be reproduced in other areas.

The worst case scenario assumes an open and large-scale use of force in order to prevent disintegration. The attempts of Belgrade to use tanks against the break-away Slovenia and Croatia in 1992 give an example of the “unity at any price” reaction -as well as of its ineffectiveness.

An intermediate pattern has been chaotically followed by the former Soviet Union. “The centre” in paralysis (aggravated after the failed *coup d'état* in August 1991) found itself unable to neutralize disintegrative trends initiated by the constituent republics. However, at some earlier stages there were clear indications that an option of using force in order to preserve the USSR did exist and was seriously considered (at least by some factions in the political leadership) -as it was with respect to Tbilisi in spring 1989 and to Vilnius at the beginning of 1991.

In fact, a number of on-going and potential domestic conflicts in the post-communist world are directly related to the secessionist trends interpreted as a threat to the very existence of respective states. Those are, for example, the cases of Nagorno-Karabakh and Abkhazia where “the centres” (Baku and Tbilisi) are trying to contain militarily the local separatist movements. Moldova's reaction to developments in the Transdnester area in 1992 followed a similar pattern -which also resulted in numerous clashes and casualties.

Taken into account numerous sources of disintegration in Russia, Moscow's policy with respect to the autonomous republics and other constituent territorial entities will most probably face pressure (and temptation) to manifest firmness and resoluteness in ensuring the integrity of the country. Will it go up to using military means remains an open question -both due to decreasing reliability of the armed forces, and because of the easily envisageable catastrophic political effects of such course. However, it is quite clear that the problem is not an artificial one -which has been clearly certified by Tatarstan (that proclaimed its sovereignty) and the Chechen republic (that proclaimed its independence).

The other post-Soviet states do not have immunity against disintegration neither - even if the latter seems of a less explosive character. However, separatist trends in the north-eastern areas of Estonia (with predominant Russian-speaking population) or in western regions of Ukraine (increasingly critical towards the officials in Kiev) are certainly not secondary elements of threat perceptions in these countries. The same could be said about the problem of Transylvania in Romania and about the southern areas of Slovakia with substantial Hungarian population.

The most violent manifestations of the problem are undoubtedly related to the developments in former Yugoslavia. Croatia vigorously rejects any attempts to question the status of territories inhabited by Serbs; Serbia is ready to use force to suppress any separatist demands in Vojvodina and Kosovo. In both cases wars generated by the threat of disintegration seem almost inevitable.

b) *Frontiers*. In fact, the threat of disintegration is in most cases closely related to the problem the borders between the states. Since territorial inviolability is one of the most important attributes of independence and statehood, it should come as no surprise that

the new states are extremely sensitive to the issue of frontiers. any actual or potential territorial claims will inevitably become a source of conflict -in fact, the most serious one on the level of relations between the new states.

The “internal” frontiers in the former multinational states were administrative in nature and politically insignificant. This of course changed dramatically when they were suddenly upgraded to the status of inter-state borders. The fact that many of these borders are not perceived as legitimate contributes in the most substantial way to threat assessments in the post-communist world.

Moreover, even the “old” inter-state frontiers inherited from the previous period are no longer perceived as unchangeable if there are any grounds to consider them unjust or inadequate. The post-WWII international order in the eastern part of Europe has collapsed, and the self-imposed psychological “taboo” with respect to the issue has disappeared as well.

The arguments challenging the status of territories under dispute highlight either their ethnic composition or historical traditions. Sometimes both arguments coincide (the Crimea), though in many cases they contradict each other (Kosovo, South Ossetia). But whatever the reasons for non-recognition of the frontiers might be, it is quite obvious that mutual territorial claims could open up a long list of conflicts virtually among the states in the area.

The only pragmatic option for the states was to admit officially the existing frontiers and territorial integrity of each other. The consequences of the alternative approach have been dramatically illustrated by the war in Bosnia. However, the recognition alone will most likely neither prevent open conflicts nor attempts by some states to use territorial problems for political advantage.

There are political and analytical grounds to differentiate between potential disputes between states over some territories and official territorial claims. In the first case there are chances that the time-bomb will never explode if carefully managed; the second case is qualitatively different since it could be perceived as an immediate threat. It is true that depending on the relative “weight” of the parties official territorial claims could be only of minor practical importance -like those formulated by Estonia with respect to Russia. But the issue could become extremely explosive if raised by the states pretending to be major international players -as in the case of Crimea the status of which is officially questioned by the Russian parliament.

c) *External interference.* In any state disintegrative trends reflect first of all its domestic weakness. But secessionist developments are often perceived as being initiated and actively supported from outside -which is probably one of the most sensitive aspects of threat perceptions in the post-communist countries.

here a “classic” example is given by the case of Nagorno-Karabakh. The absolute majority of this region's population is undoubtedly in favour of getting out of Azerbaijan. Neither are there any doubts that the latter perceives this as a conspiracy organized by Armenia and resulting in an open aggression aimed at undermining the territorial integrity

of Azerbaijan. And Though Yerevan insists that it has no intentions to incorporate the self-proclaimed Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh and that there is not a war between the two states but a domestic conflict *within* one of them -such arguments becomes increasingly irrelevant in the lighth of actual developments of warfightings in the area.

This pattern is in fact common for a whole number of the conflict-labile areas in teh post-communist world. Large-scale and violence-oriented secessionist movements of Serbs in Croatia and in Bosnia would have hardly been conceivable without substantial moral and material support from Belgrade -which, naturally, generates serious suspicions of all the neighbouring states with respect to its alleged search for a "Greater Serbia".

But political weakness of the post-communist states makes them sensitive even towards hypothetical and low-profile problems concerning potential irredentism or demands for territorial alterations. Such is the case of the so-called "Hungarian expansionism" being the matter of serious concerns in Romania and in Slovakia. Similar apprehensions might well develop in Kiev with respect to Moscow (taking into account the preponderance of Russophones in eastern and southern regions of the country) and even to Bucharest (part of Romania's territory -Northern Bukovina- as seized by Stalin in 1940 and incorporated in what now is Ukraine).

d) *Involvement and spill-over.* Conflicts within the post-communist states generating threat perceptions operate in a two-ways channel. One side is afraid of external interference whereas the other side could be seriously concerned by a perspective of being involved in or being intoxicated by the instability in its immediate vicinity. A typical example is represented by Hungary's threat perceptions with respect to Voyvodina.

The current situation in the area is relatively stable -at least if compared with many other regions of former Yugoslavia. However, Budapest does have grounds for anxiety anticipating from Belgrade either a more nationalistic policy in general or an increasing pressure over Hungarians in Voyvodina in particular (in order to provide housing for the refugees coming from the zones of hostilities). In case of dramatic developments Budapest would have to face a double challenge: accepting refugees on its own territory and trying to convince the international community (NATO, CSCE, UN, etc.) to react. It is an open question what options Hungary would have (and whether this would include military means) if such reaction is absent or ineffective.

The scope of the problem becomes unprecedented in the case of Russia. After the breakup of teh Soviet Union 25 million ethnic Russians and over 11 millions people considering Russian as their native language found themselves outside of the Russian Federation. many of them have the most serious concerns not only about the linguistic and cultural environment, but also about increasing insecurity -especially when there are serious grounds to believe that the situation could be further aggravated (such as in Central Asia). In Moscow there is a strong tendency to consider that Russia has moral and political obligations to protect the rights of these people if they are violated. Diplomats underline that this will be done only by political means whereas some less

sophisticated politicians do not hesitate in proclaiming that Russia should intervene militarily in case if clashes in other post-Soviet states result in serious violence against the Russian-speaking population.

The problem is certainly not a theoretical one. Nor is a dangerous perspective for Russia to become a victim of instabilities in its “near abroad”.

In fact, the issue of violation of human and minority rights as a justification for intervention is a serious and controversial challenge for the international community as a whole. But it is especially conflict -and threat-generating in post-communist countries due to at least two reasons: weakness and instability of the new political regimes, on the one hand and questionable legitimacy of borders -on the other hand.

GEOPOLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the disintegration of the Soviet Union have blown up the international system in the eastern part of Europe. The emerging framework of interstate relations is completely different from the one which has existed until recently. Getting accustomed to new realities is a challenge for all the international actors -but especially for the post-communist countries since these realities represent their immediate environment. Moreover, the latter is only in the making and will be strongly affected by the policy of these very states -which in itself is increasingly pushing them to reassess and to redefine its substance, goals and priorities. Needless to say that the incentives for political activism in this field are even more important for the new states which have emerged on the ruins of the multinational “socialist federations”.

In fact, each of the post-communist states have to think over the most basic questions: what are their advantages and vulnerabilities under new international circumstances, what external problems are for them of highest sensitivity, how to deal with immediate neighbours, who should be considered as potential rivals and potential allies, and so on. Answering such questions both proceeds from the existing threat perceptions and contribute to their serious redefinition.

The Baltic states, for example, may have serious grounds for considering Russia as a kind of “existential” threat -due to its territorial proximity and anticipated neo-imperialist trends in Moscow's foreign policy. But a whole number of Russia's geopolitical concerns are not a pure imagination neither. The problem of communication with the Kaliningrad region makes Moscow sensitive towards the issue of transit; substantially reduced access to the Baltic sea and the importance of some elements of strategic forces infrastructure pushes Russia towards raising the issue of joint (or rented) military bases and installations, If the Baltic states neglect such kind of demands of Russia, the latter could consider its security interests threatened.

Another example could be mentioned with respect to Russia's attitude towards the conflict in Abkhazia. Whatever the sources of the conflict in the area might be, Moscow's involvement is to a very large degree related to strategic considerations concerning the access to the Black Sea -so significantly reduced when Ukraine became independent.

The same could be said about the issue of the Crimea. History related and emotionally formulated arguments are probably of primary importance for making the Russian public sensitive towards the status of the peninsula, but the basing of the Black Sea fleet in Sebastopol is by far a much more considerable rationale for risking a large-scale crisis in relations with Ukraine. and though the validity of this rationale seems more than doubtful, the very perspective of getting alienated from the Crimea is perceived by some influential factions in Moscow as clearly threatening.

Moreover, the last example illustrates new threat perceptions of a more general character. The future international status and role of Ukraine becomes a matter of serious concerns in Moscow at least for three reasons. It is anxious that Ukraine could go nuclear -thus worsening dramatically the immediate security environment of Russia. Furthermore, to a certain extent Ukraine is perceived as a rival in relations with Europe- at least because it is geographically more western-located and -oriented. Last but not least, there are some concerns that Ukraine could become predominantly an anti-Russian political force in general.

These threat perceptions are often exaggerated and overdramatized in Moscow. But they do not appear from nothing; extremist trends do exist in Ukraine and could certainly influence its official political line. Perceptions in Moscow could be distorted due many reasons, including domestic turmoil and power struggle in Russia. But some objective realities exist (or are emerging) independently of Moscow. Ukraine is doomed to become a new important factor in the European international system affecting all the calculations and possible geopolitical schemes. especially in its immediate environment (which includes also the Central and East European countries -generating, on turns, threat perceptions on their part as well). The question about relations of Ukraine with its smaller neighbours do remain open (partnership? protectorate? zone of influence? etc.).

Some smaller post-communist countries could be also perceived as potentially threatening the interests of immediate neighbours and the international stability in general. The notions of "Great Serbia", "Great Romania" etc. are increasingly considered as not necessarily only the elements of intellectual games but rather as possible scenarios of actual developments fraught with serious instabilities in the Balkans and generating additional threat perceptions.

It is against this background that the overall realignment in the eastern part of Europe becomes a predominant trend in the area. The "algorithm" of this process will be substantially defined by the operating principles of enemy/ally images emerging in the post-communist space.

Some of them evolve from the traditional geopolitical "rules": a good neighbour is a weak neighbour, the enemy of my enemy is my friend, and so on. In the framework of this logic, for instance, it is assumed that the major geopolitical goal of Russia should be

defined as preventing the emergence of strong competing political poles in its immediate proximity -the role which could be most realistically played only by Turkey and Germany. For smaller countries (as, for example, Moldova) the problem has a different "measure": how to avoid becoming a satellite. client of the powerful neighbour (i.e.Russia). The geopolitical paradox of post-communist Poland consists in two new factors which did not exist until the very recent past: the country does not have any longer threat perceptions with respect to Germans, whereas Russia having unexpectedly been "pushed away" from Poland is becoming increasingly irrelevant in terms of threat perceptions.