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THE PROSPECTS OF A CEE-UK ALLIANCE AND
ITS POTENTIAL AS A SOVEREIGNIST ALTERNATIVE
TO FRANCO-GERMAN-BENELUX CORE EUROPE

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to Core Europe

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ABSTRACT

Since the 19th century the countries located between Germany and Russia have envisaged some kind of union. From the Danube Confederation of Lajos Kossuth in 1848 to General Piłsudski's Intermedium proposal of 1918, such a project has been a recurring dream of political thinkers and democratic activists of Central Europe. In fact, the formation of the Visegrád Group (1991) was a manifestation of this historical project. Echoing this ideal too, was British Prime Minister Boris Johnson May 2022 proposal to a number of countries in the region to form such a block in alliance with the UK, which he described as a potential alternative to the European Union. Is it possible that in the aftermath of a Russian retreat from Central Europe, such a potential union will shape the future of the region?

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Introduction

On the 30th of May 2022, UK prime minister Boris Johnson made a proposal for a 'European Commonwealth' comprising Poland, Ukraine, the UK, and the three Baltic states.¹ While Boris Johnson has departed from office, cooperation between Poland, Ukraine, the UK, the Baltics, and Scandinavia has only intensified during the course of the war in Ukraine. The proposed accession of Finland and Sweden to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) also removed any obstacle their neutrality posed regarding security cooperation among these countries.

From the "Confederation of the Danube" first proposed by Lajos Kossuth in 1848, Józef Piłsudski Intermarium proposal of 1918, countries of the CEE region sought for two centuries for an arrangement that would create a unified bloc capable of withstanding pressure from both Russia and Germany and having to bandwagon with one of the two greater powers in order to escape the other one.

The post-Cold War version of this challenge for central Europe has taken the form of how to resist the threat posed by Russia without having to submit to the federalist superstate tendencies of the Franco-German-Benelux core Europe more than they would want to. Boris Johnson's European Commonwealth proposal, reflects, in a slightly different vein, these initiatives, offering an old solution to this modern version of the enduring dilemma. The outcome of the war will be crucial for this initiative. Thus while a Russian victory could hamper such aspirations for decades to come, if not for the rest of the century, a Russian defeat could give these long-standing aspirations an unprecedented chance of realisation. Alongside the countries mentioned in Johnson's original proposal, increasing cooperation seems to be emerging between them and Scandinavia as well, especially since Finland and Sweden started their NATO accession process. While Johnson's original proposal focused only on the CEE region and the UK, Scandinavia not only shares many of the geopolitical factors that incentivized their cooperation, these factors also push it towards cooperation with the UK and Eastern Europe. Also, to be viable, any UK-CEE alliance would need to also include Scandinavia as a third participating region, in order to establish geographical connect them across the Baltic and the North Sea, as otherwise they would be geographically disconnected and isolated from each other. The European Commonwealth proposal intimated the group as a potential alternative to the European Union. While it may not materialize in such a precise form, if any kind of UK — Scandinavia — Central and Eastern Europe cooperation does emerge, it could very well become an alternative to Franco-German-Benelux core Europe, and given the policies of the countries potentially involved, it could also represent a sovereigntist alternative to the federalist tendencies of the latter.

New forms of regional cooperation after the Cold War

This evolving trend in non-core Europe related to war in Ukraine started with the announcement of the British-Polish-Ukrainian trilateral pact on the 17th of February, which was formed to coordinate the threat posed by Russia, focusing on security, cyber-security and energy security, and exists to this day.² The trend culminated in Boris Johnson's "European Commonwealth" proposal, in which he proposed a bloc consisting of Poland, Ukraine, the UK, and the three Baltic states, as an alternative to the European Union.³ It also reflected decisions like the joint declaration of Poland and the Baltic states in January 2023,⁴ the joint declaration of the Nordic and Baltic ministers of foreign affairs in Kyiv in November 2022,⁵ and, regarding economic issues, the opening of the Norway-Poland gas pipeline in September 2022,⁶ and closer cooperation between Baltic, Polish and Scandinavian grid operators.⁷

Multiple overlapping regional alliances and organizations have already been emerging in Europe in recent decades. They include the Visegrad Group, consisting of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, formed in 1991, the Lublin Triangle, consisting of Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine, formed in 2020, and the Three Seas Initiative, consisting of Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, formed in 2016, and giving the status of a partner-participant to Ukraine in 2022. In Scandinavia, the Nordic Council represents a similar regional organization, while the UK, the Nordic countries, the Baltic countries, and the Netherlands also formed a Joint Expeditionary Force in 2014. Hence, Boris Johnson's proposal for a European Commonwealth, the British-Polish-Ukrainian trilateral pact, and the cooperation between the UK, Scandinavia, and much of Eastern Europe all reflected trends in the cooperation between these countries that have been ongoing for decades.

CEE and Scandinavian attitudes towards Russia compared with 'core' Europe

Certain historical trends also suggest an even deeper background for why the attitude to Russia was very different for these countries than for France, Germany, and the Benelux states at the core of the EU, and this, in turn, explains why they are turning to the UK (and the US) instead of turning to Franco-German-Benelux core Europe.

A key historical issue for both the CEE region and Scandinavia has been the vicious cycle of Russia's demand for security zones. Ever since the Duchy of Moscow

emerged as a regional power in the fifteenth century, Russia's lack of natural borders had the tendency of requiring control over neighbouring territories along its borders, as security zones. As soon as Russia gained control of such zones, it soon came to view them as part of an expanding Russian empire, usually annexing them, and demanding territories along its new borders, to form new security zones for those annexed territories. And once it annexed more territory it demanded additional security zones for those in a seemingly endless expansionary process of voicing security concerns, demanding security zones, then annexing territory. This way, over the 300 years after Ivan the Terrible began this escalating expansionary drive, Russia annexed on average 130 square kilometres every single day.⁸ When Ivan the Terrible changed the name of his polity from the Grand Duchy of Muscovy to the Tsardom of Russia in 1547, the country covered about 3 million square kilometres as opposed to today's 17 million square kilometres and the Soviet Union's 22 million square kilometres. Its eastern border was merely the Ural Mountains (with Siberia beyond that being populated by non-Slavic subarctic Asian nomadic tribes) In the south, it did not even reach the Black Sea (as the Pontic Steppe was inhabited by Tatars) and its western border was roughly the same as today, and did not include Finland, the Baltic states, Belarus or Ukraine (Finland was part of the Kingdom of Sweden, Estonia and Latvia formed the Livonian Confederation ruled by a German-speaking elite, and Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine formed part of the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth). From this beginning, in the course of the 19th -20th centuries, the search to find Russia and the Soviet Union's "natural borders", and implementing its need for security zones, Russian and Soviet armies ended up on the doorstep of China, Japan and Korea, and even crossing the Bering Strait to Alaska in the east, to the south it bordered Afghanistan, and extended to the middle of Germany in the west, multiplying the size of the country (including its satellite states) by 8-10 times in this process. From the perspective of countries conquered over this period, it seemed that nothing satisfied Russian insecurity sufficiently not to raise further claims for additional security zones. In the south, annexing all of Central Asia wasn't sufficient for Russia not to raise its claim to Afghanistan as a security zone for the territory it had annexed in Central Asia. In the west, even with control of the entire CEE region, and East Germany under its control, the USSR was still dissatisfied and voiced concerns over the integration of West Germany into a western alliance structure. In 1952 Stalin, in fact, proposed a demilitarized, neutral Germany with serious restrictions on its foreign and defense policy, prohibiting it from having an army, or from joining NATO and even the

European Defense Community. If accepted such a neutralisation would have resulted in West Germany constituting a new Soviet security zone.⁹ To put this in perspective, in the Cold War context of 1952, Moscow made virtually identical demands regarding Germany, as it did regarding Ukraine before the war, citing virtually identical security concerns, despite having, at that time, the entire CEE region under its military control. This inexorable trend in Russian foreign policy sowed the seeds of widespread scepticism in the CEE region towards Russia's claims in Ukraine of security concerns and demands for establishing new security zones.

Regarding their particular historical experiences of Russian irridentism, Eastern Europe can be divided into four zones. The first zone is Poland, the Baltic states, and Romania, countries that suffered full or partial Russian annexation even under Imperial Russia before the Soviet takeover. They are also direct neighbors, and/or have enduring conflicts with Russia even in the post-Cold War period. Estonia and most of Latvia were annexed by Russia at the time of Peter the Great in 1721, and Lithuania was annexed in 1795. The three Baltic states became independent in 1918 but were then invaded by the Soviet Union in 1940, to regain their independence again only in 1991. Today, not only all three Baltic states are direct neighbors of Russia, but Estonia and Latvia also confront constant tension with Russia due to large Russian minority population that were settled in these two countries during the Soviet occupation. As the three Baltic states and most Western countries view, and, throughout the Cold War, viewed Soviet rule between 1940 and 1941 not as legitimate annexation but an unlawful occupation. The Fourth Geneva Convention and therefore international law explicitly prohibits an occupying power from transferring parts of its population into the territory it illegitimately occupies,¹⁰ Estonia and Latvia consider the Russian minorities resettled in their territories by the Soviet Union as akin to Moroccan settlers in Western Sahara, or Indonesian settlers in East Timor during its occupation after 1972.

By the Congress of Vienna in 1815, Russia had also annexed most of Poland. Two Polish wars of independence were defeated by Russian force of arms in 1831 and 1863. Poland became independent in 1918 but fought a war with Russia until 1921. It was invaded by the USSR after the Nazi-Soviet, Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of 1939, and was under Soviet occupation from 1945 until the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. The last Russian troops only left the country in 1993. During the decades of Soviet occupation, protests repeatedly erupted against Soviet rule in 1956, 1970,

and 1980. The remaining Kaliningrad exclave means, Russia is still a direct neighbor of Poland. Meanwhile, ever since Russian imperial times Romania, Bessarabia have endured territorial disputes with Russia and present-day Moldova, is indirectly involved in a frozen conflict with Russia regarding the Transnistrian region. This group are most concerned about Russian irridentist ambitions.

The Second group consists of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia, countries that suffered Soviet occupation, but were never annexed by Imperial Russia nor are direct neighbours or in conflict with Russia now. Hungary (and Slovakia as well when it was part of the Kingdom of Hungary) was briefly invaded by imperial Russia in 1849, but never permanently occupied. The Transcarpathia region that the USSR annexed from Czechoslovakia and Hungary in 1945 (having been contested by these two countries after 1918), today belongs to Ukraine, and not to Russia. Thus while both Czechoslovakia and Hungary suffered Soviet occupation during the Cold War, and brutal repression of their independence and reform movements in 1956 and 1968 respectively, their experience of Russian invasion neither reached as far back in time, nor is as directly present today, as in the case of the first group of countries.

As a third group, we can identify Bulgaria, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Greece. While the general historical experience of both the previous two groups with Russia was overwhelmingly negative, albeit to different extents, that of the third group is broadly positive. In the 19th century, these countries were liberated from Ottoman rule with the help of, or in case of Bulgaria, directly by Russia. Moreover, the combination of their Slavic languages, majority Orthodox Christian religion, and Cyrillic script also culturally links them to Russia. While Bulgaria was an ally of Germany in the second world war, it did not declare war on the USSR. Although it was also occupied by the USSR in 1944, the big picture for Bulgaria was still much different from the Czech, Hungarian, Polish, Romanian, or Slovak experience. This was even more the case regarding Serbia, which was not only helped by Russia in its struggle for independence from the Ottomans, but was also an ally of Russia in both world wars, and wasn't occupied by the USSR after the Second World War. The only period in history when Russo-Serb relations were hostile, was during the Stalin-Tito split between 1948 and -1953, apart from that, the relationship was always amicable.

As we can see, the countries with close Russian ties discussed so far, the most hostile are Poland and the Baltic states, the group of countries that were the most severely affected by Russia's historic expansion.

Alongside Eastern Europe, Scandinavia is also a region that has had its own close encounters with Russia. Russo-Swedish wars lasted for over five centuries from the battle at the Neva river in 1240 to the Russian annexation of Finland in 1809. These Russo-Swedish wars were mostly fought on Finish soil, as at the time not only Finland but today's Murmansk Oblast, Republic of Karelia, and Leningrad Oblast as well were mostly inhabited by Finnic and Sámi ethnic groups.¹¹ Despite being neutral, Sweden also suffered multiple incursions by Soviet submarines into its territorial waters during the Cold War.¹² Finland, which was part of Sweden from the 12th century until 1809, then an autonomous grand duchy under Russia from 1809 till 1917, was invaded by the USSR in 1939, and barely avoided the fate of the Baltic states. The USSR even established a communist puppet government at the border town of Terijoki before the Soviet troops invaded Finland.¹³ While Soviet troops failed to take the entire country, Finland had to cede 11% of its territory after 1945. During the Cold War, Finland followed the policy of "Finlandization" which while viewed by many around the world as a successful example of neutrality, was viewed by many in Finland as painfully restricting its sovereignty in order to appease the USSR.¹⁴ Despite being a NATO member, Denmark and Norway also faced Soviet pressure throughout the cold war, resulting in self-imposed restrictions on the defense policies of the two countries.¹⁵

This historical experience explains why Eastern Europe and Scandinavia have a more profound concerned attitude towards Russia, than the rest of Western Europe. What further exacerbated this concern was the declaration made by Russia on 17th December 2021, which required all NATO structures to be withdrawn from all NATO member states that joined the alliance after 1997, meaning all East European members.¹⁶

France and Germany, by contrast, are not only more prone to appease Russia regarding the 2022-23 invasion of Ukraine, but also have a radically different historical experience than central European states. France allied with Russia against Germany in both World Wars, and experienced German occupation in the 20th century, but not Russian. The only case when it experienced a degree of Russian occupation was at the end of the Napoleonic war in 1814-15. Meanwhile,

Prussia, Austria and later the German Confederation on numerous occasions made agreements with Russia on the partition of Poland and parts of Eastern Europe between 1772-1795 and in 1815. At this time, Austria was as much a member of the German Confederation as any other of the German states, technically the joint Austrian-Russian repression of the Hungarian war of independence of 1848-1849 can also be viewed as an additional case of Russo-German domination over Eastern Europe. Meanwhile in the twentieth century, under the terms of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact (1939), the Third Reich and the Soviet Union states sought to partition all of Eastern Europe.

Historical precedents for regional blocs in the CEE region

This historical background explains not only the different geopolitical attitudes to Russia that Eastern Europe and Scandinavia have compared to those of the Franco-German-Benelux core Europe. It also intimates that East European suspicions reflect not only their historical experience of Russia , but also of Germany's mittel-European policy, and Russo-German pacts that affected the region as well. These fears led to a series of proposals to unite the smaller nations of the region in a federation or confederation of states , to act as an alliance against both German and Russian aspirations for central Europe. Central European federation or confederation has assumed a growing importance in regional political thinking. Out of a number of proposals for such collaborative arrangements three stand out

In the mid nineteenth century, Lajos Kossuth, the leader of the Hungarian war of independence of 1848-49 that was crushed by the joint effort of the Russian and Austrian empires, proposed his plan for a Danubian Confederation by 1862. Kossuth assumed that even if the nations of the Austrian Empire successfully managed to gain their independence, they would not be able to withstand German or Russian pressure without some kind of unity. The countries that the Kossuth proposal planned to include in the confederation were Croatia, Hungary, Romania, and Serbia.¹⁷ As these jurisdictions were all located along the course of the river Danube, the waterway served as a focus of geographical cohesion between the constituent nations.

Somewhat differently, in 1906, Aurel Popovici a Romanian politician from Banat proposed a United States of Greater Austria. Popovici envisaged transforming Austria-Hungary into a democratic federation, dividing the empire into constituent states. These states would not cohere on the basis of the former historical

provinces of Austria-Hungary, but on an ethnic basis, partitioning the Bohemian crown to a Czech and a German state, Transylvania to a Romanian and a Hungarian (in this case Székely) state. The Kingdom of Hungary would be divided along ethnic lines, Galicia becoming a Polish and a Ukrainian state. In all Popovici envisaged a new federation of 14 constituent ethnic states.¹⁸ If implemented at the time, this federal arrangement might have transformed the Habsburg Realm into a democratic federation of ethnic states, maintaining the unity of a constitutional Habsburg monarchy in military and economic terms against the outside world, and especially against Russia and Germany, whilst at the same time granting self-rule to all major ethnic groups within the empire.

The third regional concept Józef Piłsudski's Intermarium proposal immediately after the First World War, conceived a union of Belarus, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine, to ensure the combined force of these four countries could withstand German pressure from the west and Soviet pressure from the east. The project would have been a resurrection of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, albeit in a modern form. After the Polish-Soviet war ended in 1921 with the Bolsheviks occupying Belarus and Ukraine, and subsequently incorporating them into the Soviet Union in 1922, Ukraine and Belarus dropped out of the group of prospective members. Piłsudski subsequently revised the Intermarium plan to include Scandinavia and the Baltic states, as well as Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Yugoslavia.¹⁹

Thus these plans of the 19th and early 20th century can be seen as precursors to proposals today like the Visegrad Group, the Lublin Triangle, and the Three Seas Initiative. Moreover, historically and today this prospective Central European alliance looks to support against Russia from the US and the UK rather than Germany or France.

While Boris Johnson's original proposal regarding Central and Eastern Europe was limited to Poland, Ukraine, and the Baltic states, the form of such a block would also mean the prospect for other countries of the CEE region to join the centuries-old dream from the Danube Confederation of Lajos Kossuth to the Intermarium of Józef Piłsudski of forming a group that could be a player on its own in the game of major powers. This grouping would seem to be a suitable choice for the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia, the other three members of the Visegrad Group, and even Romania, given its tense relationship with Russia, together with all members of the Three Seas Initiative.

While Johnson's original proposal did not include Scandinavia, geopolitical considerations which have assumed growing importance since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, would suggest they would join such a potential alliance. Scandinavia shares the same boundary issues with Russia as the CEE countries. Due to its past and present experience and geographical proximity, it views Russia as more of a threat than Franco-German-Benelux core Europe does. Consequently, it is keen to maintain closer ties with the US and the UK than Franco-German-Benelux core Europe is. On the other hand, without Scandinavia, any CEE alliance would be geographically isolated from the UK, questioning the viability of the enlarged concept. With the inclusion of Scandinavia however, this group of countries forms a geopolitical grouping running from the Atlantic across the North Sea to Scandinavia and from there across the Baltic Sea to Central and Eastern Europe.

Why the outcome of the war is crucial for future alliance structures

The outcome of the war in Ukraine is crucial regarding these possible geopolitical outcomes. The war's end will define the balance of power in the region at a very basic level. As Zbigniew Brzezinski famously wrote, after the Cold War, "without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire."²⁰ Meanwhile, any regional grouping in Central and Eastern Europe is only viable if it has a realistic chance of defending itself against Russia. Otherwise, it merely functions as the eastern frontier of a Franco-German-Benelux core Europe, dependent on it for its survival, and having to subject itself to Brussels to get the necessary security guarantees against Russia. Whether if it has a realistic chance to defend itself against Russia, greatly depends on whether Russia, as Brzezinski phrased it, ceases to become a Eurasian empire.

The truth of Brzezinski's statement can be very easily demonstrated if we take the simple measurement of population, the factor that traditionally underpinned Russian strength. As Russian politicians, including Vladimir Putin himself, and the prematurely triumphalist editorial of Ria Novosty²¹ intimated, the ultimate Russian war aim following victory in Ukraine would be the reestablishment of the Soviet Union, with the formation of some kind of confederation of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. In the event of a Russian victory and the formation of such a confederation, Russia would likely seek to coerce Kazakhstan into joining an enlarged confederation. Russian discourse has repeatedly targeted Kazakhstan, as it did Ukraine before the intervention of February 2022. Official spokespersons describe Kazakhstan as an artificial or 'made up country',²² and stress the need to reestablish some kind of union between Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, and

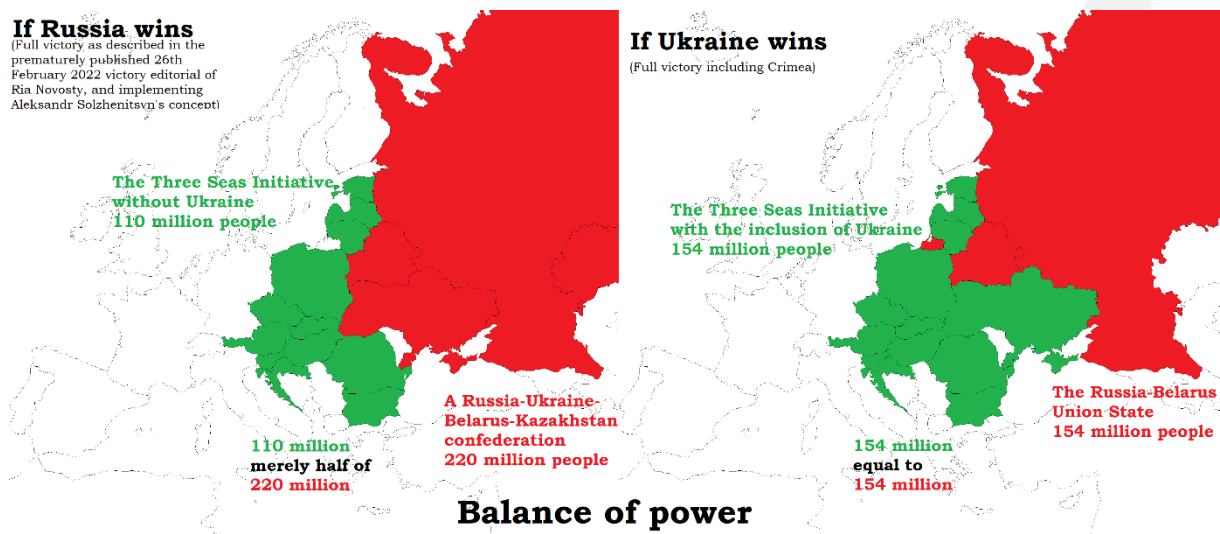
Ukraine, amalgamating what Russian nationalists consider the rightful territory of the Russian world. This geopolitical understanding has informed the discourse of high profile Russian intellectuals, such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn since the end of the Cold War.²³ Moreover, as a member of both the CSTO and the Eurasian Union, Kazakhstan seemed to be in the grip of a greater Russian confederation even before the war, and especially after the Russian military intervention in January 2022, making such a scenario evermore likely.

Thus the most likely outcome of a Russian victory in Ukraine would be a virtual reestablishment of the Soviet Union in the form of a Russian-Belarusian-Kazakh-Ukrainian confederation under the hegemony of Russia. The combined population of such a conglomeration would be roughly 220 million people. By contrast, the combined population of the member states of the Three Seas Initiative, the broadest regional bloc proposed in Central and Eastern Europe, is, without Ukraine, only 110 million, a half of the population of a potential greater Russian grouping.²⁴

In the event of a Ukrainian victory, however, Ukraine would most likely join the CEE region. Russia on the other hand would not only lose Ukraine, but since the war began, also seems to be losing its influence in Kazakhstan as well: This began with Kazakhstan determining not to assist Russia in bypassing western sanctions,²⁵ and continued with Russia in turn blocking the transit of Kazakh crude oil through its territory.²⁶ Kazakhstan, subsequently began exporting its oil to the west across the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.²⁷ This process culminated with China's president declaring support for Kazakhstan's independence and territorial integrity.²⁸ The prospect of Kazakhstan resisting Russia with the support of China, and shifting into China's expanding sphere of influence, in the event of further Russian setbacks in the Ukraine should not be discounted. Without Ukraine and Kazakhstan, Russia's would be reduced to the Union State of Russia and Belarus. The two countries have a combined population of 154 million. On the side of the Three Seas Initiative, if we add Ukraine to it as well, its population also amounts to about 154 million people.²⁹ With a two-to-one population ratio in the case of a Russian victory, as opposed to a one-to-one ratio in the case of a Ukrainian victory, the geopolitical picture is pretty clear. As per capita GDP is on average by no means lower in the CEE region than in Russia, the proportional size of the economies is also similar.

Demographic and economic strength does not always equate with military strength of course, and Russia's military is stronger than its population or economy suggests. The war in Ukraine however showed that the Russian military was not as powerful as western strategists once thought. Up until the war, the general view of the Russian military assumed that in the case of a conflict with NATO, its advance could only be stopped somewhere in the middle of Germany, and even there only with the deployment of half the US army.

This war demonstrated that in reality, however, the Russian army would struggle to reach the middle of Ukraine. Moreover, while a swift victory in Ukraine could have enabled Russia to preserve its capacity intact due to the effectiveness of Ukraine's resistance, the Russian military arsenal was seriously degraded. According to estimates by EU officials, by November, Russia had lost 60% of its tanks, 40% of its armed personal carriers, 20% of its artillery, and 70% of its precision missiles.³⁰ As the pre-war annual manufacturing capacity of Russia was 200-250 tanks,³¹ replacing these losses would take at least a decade.



At the same time, a potential CEE bloc with a population and economy equal to that of Russia could sustain itself on equal terms with a post conflict Russian state. Even in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) terms contemporary Russia has at best an economy the size of Germany, and a potential population that is one-tenth of China, one-third of the EU and about half of the US. Consequently, it no longer possesses the demographic or economic strength that it had during the cold war when the Soviet Union was the third most populous country on the planet. Russia

can longer realistically maintain a military capacity equal to that of either China or the US.

Of course, if Russia managed to win the war according to its original intention in February 2022, and occupied Kyiv in days, and the rest of Ukraine in weeks, and doing so with minor losses, and sustaining its international reputation, Russia could have not only masked its long term decline, but in forming a Eurasian confederation with Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine, it could have recovered much of its lost demographic and economic resources. Such an outcome would have assured its 2:1 ratio of superiority against any putative Three Seas Initiative, whilst preserving its military superiority over the CEE block as well.

Thus despite its relative decline, achieving hegemony over the CEE region was a very real possibility in the aftermath of a speedy Russian conquest of Ukraine in 2022. By contrast In the event of a Ukrainian victory, the Three Seas Initiative or any other similar regional bloc covering most countries of the region, including Ukraine, would have the resources to equal to Russia in everything but nuclear weapons. The Russian nuclear threat however may be kept in check as long as these countries remain part of NATO. Moreover, an alliance with the UK and Scandinavia would bring the power of such a grouping to the next level.

To put this in a realpolitik context, great powers tend to view what is acceptable or not through a lens of not what their rivals and potential rivals promise to do or not do , but what they are capable of doing. Therefore, they want to make sure their rivals and potential rivals do not possess the capability of harming them. This was the rationale behind Britain's traditional European policy regarding the balance of power, to make sure no single power achieved hegemony on the European continent and giving it the capability to challenge Britain on the seas, or invade it. This is also a the rationale behind the US strategy aiming to prevent the rise of any Eurasian empire that could achieve the capability of challenging it on either the Atlantic or the Pacific Ocean ends of the World continent, and threatening its global power. The very same rationale is voiced by Russia regarding Ukraine, fearing that Ukraine joining NATO would give NATO the hegemonic capability of overawing Russia. In all these cases, great powers tend not to believe challenger promises of not using these capabilities against them, because they doubted such promises would be fulfilled. Following this logic, if Russia fully reached its war aim as leaked by Ria Novosty, and implement its grand vision as voiced by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and other prominent Russian intellectuals throughout the last three

decades, and established some kind of confederation from Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan, and doing this with preserving its military relatively intact, this would have put the CEE region in a position of permanent weakness.

As such a Russian federation would permanently outnumber the Three Seas Initiative in population, and could invade any Central European country or the entire region at any time, unless troops of a rival great power (which in this case could only be the US) was permanently stationed there. On the other hand, a Ukrainian victory leading to Ukraine joining the Three Seas Initiative or any other regional alliance, (and Kazakhstan securing its independence the way it has been doing in recent months with China's aid) would enable the countries of the region to form a coalition that would have the capability to defend itself against Russia and deprive Russia of the capability of invading any time at will.

Could cooperation continue and develop after the war in Ukraine?

The main question, of course, is whether a UK-Scandinavia-Eastern Europe enhanced cooperation continues after the war in the event of a Russian defeat or not. Certain factors appear to support a scenario where it continues.

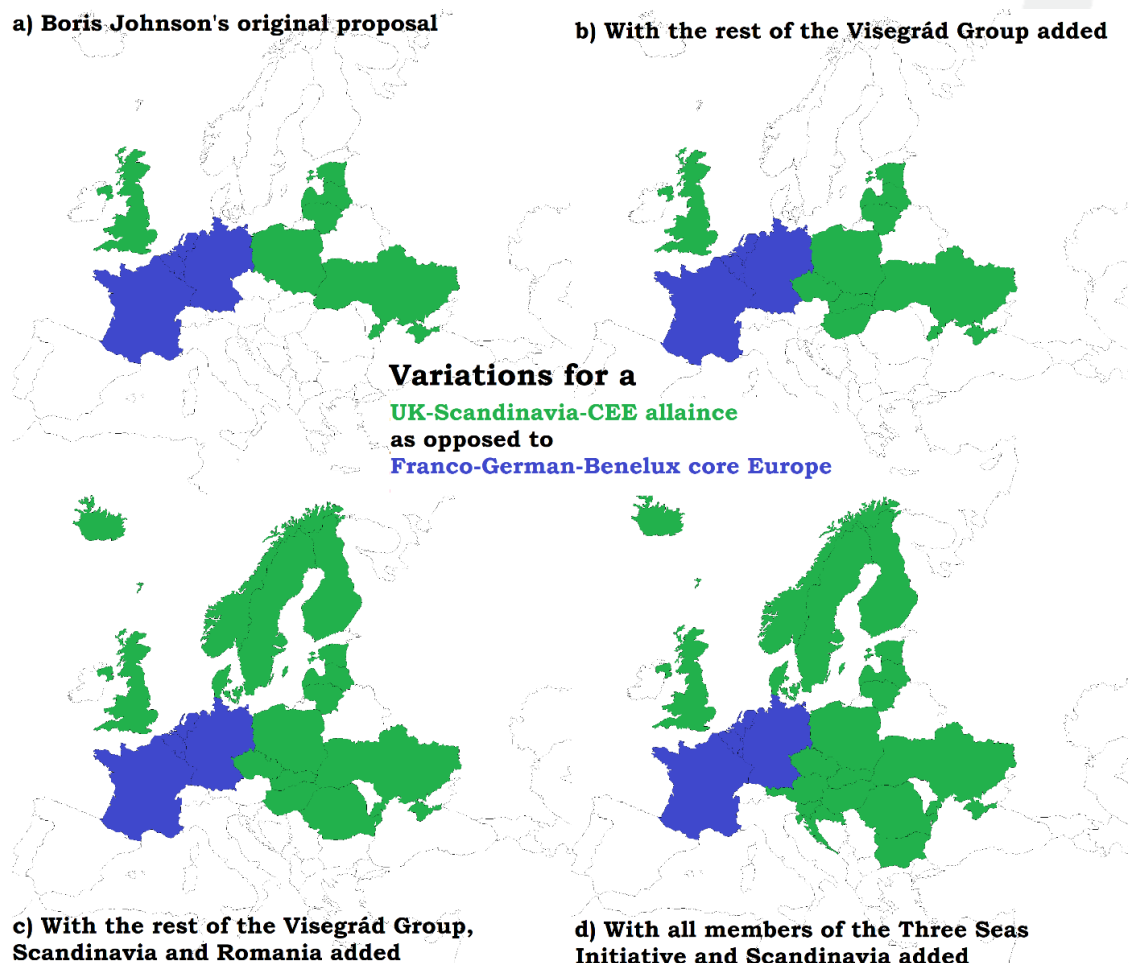
Thus even if peace with Russia is achieved, it will most likely be an uncertain peace for the foreseeable future. A Russian defeat would give the chance for the CEE or the CEE and the Nordic countries to build a strong alliance that would be capable of resisting Russia without direct military help from outside. But even in that case, they could only achieve and sustain such a position if they built and maintained such a coalition. Moreover, with no nuclear capacity of their own, they would still need the nuclear umbrella of the US and the UK to deter Russia from using the threat of nuclear blackmail.

The Central European states are conventionally characterized by widespread resistance to the federalist tendencies aiming at the creation of a European superstate dominated by a French-German-Benelux core Europe. Significantly, Poland and Hungary have longstanding disputes with the EU, whilst the UK left the European union, Norway and Iceland never joined the EU, and Denmark and Sweden, whilst members of the EU did not adopt the euro currency.

- Atlanticism is another understanding this group values as opposed to the attitude of Franco-German-Benelux core Europe, which tends to be more sceptical towards the US, and more dovish towards Russia. The UK has a long established cultural and North Atlantic geostrategic proximity to the USA. Poland, Ukraine, and

the Baltics, share a heightened geostrategic fear of Russia, and in Scandinavia, Atlanticism is a given. This will push them to seek closer ties with the US than the Franco-German-Benelux bloc wants. Party politics in these countries, increasingly find parties sympathetic to greater union with Europe in contestation with homegrown Atlanticist and Eurosceptic parties opposed to the policies of France and Germany. Before the events of 2022, the neutrality of Finland and Sweden meant a geostrategic gap existed between the Atlanticist countries of the region. However, NATO accession will eliminate this gap. Consequently, these countries will form a maritime geographic continuum through the sea lanes of the North Sea and the Baltic Sea, with the Baltic Sea becoming the lake of this potential alliance group.

In economic terms, British and Scandinavian capital and technology combined with relatively cheap East European labor and agriculture, as well as Scandinavian and Ukrainian mineral resources (including Norwegian and Ukrainian natural gas) constitute a promising basis for investment and growth. As a confederal grouping the arrangement would have a combined population of 170 million- more than the population of either Russia or the French-German-Benelux block.³²



So while it is not certain, that these states will continue cooperating after the war, a combination of these factors would seem likely to promote it. What would such a collaboration entail? If some prospective UK-Scandinavia-Eastern Europe block emerges, it would evidently rival the Franco-German-Benelux bloc. It would likely persuade the group to stay out of the putative federalist European superstate. This would meet the direction of the Eurosceptic parties in the majority of the countries of the grouping, which are increasingly assuming a dominant political role.

A technical and political difficulty for any kind of deepening cooperation would be the simple fact, that while most of the countries participating in this grouping are members of the EU, the UK, which is the largest economy in group has left the EU, and Norway, the greatest crude oil and natural gas producer in the group never joined. The simplest outcome for this situation could be that those countries that are members of the EU, form some kind of arrangement within it, and as such, maintain special relations with the UK and Norway. A good analogy for this could be the way that under the Nordic cooperation, EU members Denmark, Finland, and Sweden maintain special relations with Iceland and Norway outside the EU.

Ultimately, there are of course limits to how far cooperation between states outside and inside the EU could go, so the participating states may at some point face the choice of either continuing cooperation outside the EU or not enhancing any greater EU federal power. While a block outside the EU is actually closer to Boris Johnson's original proposal, and the scenario that would enable a unified bloc to emerge, it still seems to be less likely in the short term as it would require all participant states to leave the EU. Moreover, if such an economic bloc outside the EU forms, it would most likely be significantly different, than the EU. Given the strong sovereigntist attitudes in most of the participant states, as opposed to the federalist-superstate aspirations of Brussels, it would most likely constitute a loose free trade bloc of sovereign nations. This would not be unprecedented. Significantly in the 1960s, a similar initiative had assumed the form of EFTA, with British-Scandinavian-Swiss-Austrian-Portuguese participation. In essence, such a bloc could mean resurrecting the spirit of EFTA, this time within the framework of a British-Scandinavian-East European context. As EFTA still exists, such a move could nominally even take place in the form of all these countries joining the EFTA. However as the EFTA as of today, only consists of Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland, all those countries joining it would de facto mean the formation of a new bloc, instead of a mere expansion of EFTA. Such a bloc could, of course, continue to maintain mutually beneficial economic relations with the EU, but without participating in its superstate aspirations in a similar way most EFTA

countries now do under the EEA. The various countries of the group are dominated by parties with very different philosophies, from the Scandinavian social democrats to the Polish conservatives, but precisely because of its nature, it would be a geostrategic alliance and loose free trade association of sovereign nations based on a pragmatic approach, and would presumably have much more flexibility than the EU regarding cooperation between governments with different domestic political agendas.

Regarding security, due to the Atlanticist focus of this group of countries, it would certainly function under the security umbrella of NATO. As such a group would represent a more Atlanticist line than Franco-German-Benelux core Europe,, it would also be in the interest of the United States to support the formation of such a group.

Conclusion

Building a regional alliance across the CEE region to enable it to counter pressure from both Russia and Germany and make it a player in the European balance of power has been an aspiration in the region since the nineteenth century. A major incentive for such ambitions has been the fact that each time Russia or Germany partitioned Central and Eastern Europe, or jointly arranged its fate, had disastrous consequences for the smaller nations Central Europe, from the partitions of Poland in 1772-1815, the joint Russian-Austrian suppression of the Hungarian war of independence in 1848-49 to the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939 which led to the Nazi-Soviet partition of Poland, and the Soviet invasion of Finland, the Baltic states and Romania. The modern version of this security dilemma of being stuck between Russia and Germany, is the challenge to counter the Russian threat without having to give in to the federalist superstate aspirations of Franco-German-Benelux core Europe. The Russian invasion of Ukraine both incentivized the pursuit of such initiatives for some kind of CEE regional alliance, and a Russian defeat would provide a chance not seen for centuries for the establishment of such an alliance, especially since Franco-German core Europe approved significantly more dovish on Russia than Poland and the Baltic states. "Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire" - Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote. And indeed, given Russian casualties during the war, and its limited economic and demographic resources, also failing to make Ukraine its satellite would significantly reduce Russia's international status. An alliance including most if not all countries in the CEE region would have a realistic chance of resisting any future incursions. If, with the US supplying military equipment and deterring Russia from the use of nuclear weapons, Ukraine can resist a Russian conquest some kind of CEE regional alliance - for instance, a combination of the Visegrád Group and the Lublin Triangle - would

be more capable of doing so in the future. Generations in the CEE region grew up in circumstances, where Russia could invade them at any time unless the direct presence of a rival great power deterred it from doing so.

Achieving a new dispensation, where the region becomes capable of standing up to Russia on its own would be game changer for European security. Even in a worst-case scenario, where US commitment to the region wains in the ensuing decades, building such an alliance structure while US support is still firm, would potentially assure the future viability of such a regional bloc. Boris Johnson's imaginative proposal in May 2022 for a European Commonwealth to Poland, Ukraine, and the Baltic states, and the establishment of the UK-Poland-Ukraine triple alliance signalled British support for this. Since then, the policies of Nordic countries indicated increasing support from Scandinavia as well. While Boris Johnson's proposal for a European Commonwealth only aimed at Poland, Ukraine, and the Baltic states, for other countries in the region, such as the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, or Slovakia, joining such a bloc would also be the opportunity to fulfil the aspiration of a powerful regional bloc, dating back to Józef Piłsudski and Lajos Kossuth. Regarding Scandinavia, not only the war, but also its recent history marked by close cooperation with the UK, and holding a certain distance from the EU, as well as its geopolitical circumstances would make it prudent to join as well. A UK-Scandinavia-CEE bloc, under the security umbrella of NATO, could also constitute a sovereigntist alternative at the European level to the Franco-German-Benelux core Europe and its federalist superstate aspirations.

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