



CENTRAL EUROPE, SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN SECURITY POLICY

- edited by Tamás Csiki Varga -

*Mihai Zodian, PhD**



SECURITY PERCEPTION AND SECURITY POLICY IN CENTRAL EUROPE, 1989–2019

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Security Perception and Security Policy in Central Europe, 1989-2019, Routledge, 2024, 160 pages.

The volume contains an introduction by Tamás Csiki Varga and nine chapters by: Ádám Budai, Tomáš Čížik, Zdeněk Kříž, Hennadiy Maksak, Tamás Levente Molnár, Milena Palczewska, Alexandra Sarcinschi, and Aleksandar Vanchoski. The states covered are Hungary, Slovakia, Czechia, Ukraine, Austria, Poland, Romania, Croatia, and Serbia.

Keywords: *Central Europe; Ukraine; security; security policy; structured and focused comparison; NATO; EU; military power; Russia.*

Central Europe has made a bit of a comeback in public attention after Russia's renewed aggression against Ukraine in 2022. *Security Perception and Security Policy* offers an empirical approach to the region's politico-military issues, and it is written by local experts, using a very pragmatic and concise style. The book is the result of an international research, involving several institutes in the region¹.

** Mihai Zodian, PhD, is a Researcher at the Centre for Defence and Security Strategic Studies within the "Carol I" National Defence University, Bucharest, Romania. E-mail: zodian@gmail.com*

¹ To warn against a possible conflict of interests, one of the authors is a personal colleague and I participated in a different section of the same research project.



The term Central Europe is often politicized, but the editors opted for an inclusive approach, which increases the utility of this product.

I recommend *Security Perception and Security Policy* to anyone interested in the events of this space and on their background. The chapters contain a high degree of contextualization, a description of the official policies, and of the main turns and twists during the 30 years it covers. It helps the reader to understand current decisions and attitudes, especially the differences between Central European states. The volume is also interesting because of the methodological practices of its authors.

Security Perception and Security Policy follows the structured-focused comparison practice of investigation. This approach takes the classical method of looking for similarities and differences between some objects and adds more direction and precision to it (George and Bennett 2005). It was promoted as a qualitative alternative to statistical-inspired scientific investigation with the promise of more depth and nuance, while keeping the main tenets of positivism. This approach has grown in stature in the last decades and is close to the reformed research practices of the case study by process tracing (George and Bennett 2005).

Thus, the chapters share a common framework of themes to investigate. The main research directions are security perceptions, foreign policy orientation, level of ambition and policy issues. Most states were influenced by the fall of Communism, the transition to democracy and market economy, and the orientation of foreign policy away from Moscow and toward the West. Here, NATO and EU integration represented the main goal of regional political elites. Often forgotten in current debates regarding the responsibility for Russia's aggression against Ukraine is the fact that countries in Central Europe played an active role in pressing for the enlargement of both transatlantic organizations.

For example, Poland led the wave of changes in the late 1980s and then, emphasized independence and Euro-Atlantic integration. Threat perception was oriented, in the 2010s, towards internal phenomena like poverty and aging, but there was a growing emphasis on the risk of war in the region. The most important security policy goal was to avoid Russian domination, a goal shared by most states (Palczewska 2024, 85). For this reason, the partnership with the United States represents a salient pillar of Polish security policies, but European defence may also be taken into consideration.

By contrast, Hungarian society considered that military threats were less important after the fall of Communism and of the Soviet Union. Domestic issues were salient, especially the ones related to welfare, prices, and public safety. Hungary was one of the first NATO and EU members from Central Europe, and its security policy was linked to the integration process or the decisions of these two organizations. It also emphasized neighborhood strategies and actions, migration policies, and a degree of pacifism in international affairs (Budai 2024).



Romania joined NATO and EU later as it was interested in domestic security reform and was concerned about Russia's intentions and policies. The internal policies and collective memory had a major impact on security perceptions, which also stressed welfare issues or prices, and were less preoccupied with international terrorism or migration in comparison with other European societies (Sarcinschi 2024, 99). Like in Poland, the importance of war as a security threat grew after Russia's conflict of 2008 with Georgia and its aggression against Ukraine which began in 2014 and expanded in 2022. Romania's foreign policy was oriented towards NATO, the EU, and the United States.

Ukraine tried to steer a middle course. It attempted to remain a neutral state, with an independent democracy and a defensive military policy, until Russia's interferences and the invasion of 2014 pushed the state towards the West (Maksak 2024). NATO membership was promised in vague terms at the Bucharest Summit in 2008, but a combination of internal and external factors kept Ukraine away from the alliance. The Revolution of Dignity (the Maiden Protests) and Putin's aggression made Russia the main threat, and the West the main source of support (Maksak 2024, 57-59).

There are a total of nine case studies. *Security Perception and Security Policy* shows the commonalities and the differences between the Central European states with brief and easy-to-read chapters, containing a lot of data on public opinion and security documents. The main drawbacks of this volume are the emphasis on formal texts, which may confuse a reader unaccustomed to the context, and the lack of a separate chapter for conclusions and comparisons.

That being written, it is my belief the book is valuable for any reader interested in the region, due to its thematic and coherent nature, that structured and focused comparison should become the rule for most collective and comparative research project in Romania and I hope that the volume will inspire further research, for example, concerning the decision making processes and their sources.

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