Eastern Europe in Security Politics

The Russian intervention in Georgia in 2008, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, or the Russian war against Ukraine – the list of former or active conflicts within Eastern Europe is long. These conflicts and security politics in Eastern Europe in general are often explained by tensions between "the West" – mostly NATO and EU states – and "the East" – mostly Russia. This, however, misses central conflict dynamics, peace initiatives, and diverse Eastern European perspectives.

Many aspects of security politics in Eastern Europe, including its conflict history and conflict management, are connected to the region's developments in the 1990s. After the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, new states were created in Eastern Europe. Many of these states joined NATO, some also the EU. An initial phase of rapprochement between the former enemies of the Cold War took place during the 1990s and early 2000s. During this phase, particularly in the context of German reunification, treaties were made that secured the new states' independence and sovereignty in exchange for limited stationing rights for NATO's nuclear weapons and troops. Additionally, common security institutions were built, at their centre the new NATO-Russia-Council and the reformed OSCE.

From 2005 on, East-West relations changed – and with them, the situation in Eastern Europe. Russia became more assertive and particularly started re-narrating the history of the aftermath of the Cold War. Russia justifies its behaviour by NATO's "expansion" into Central and Eastern Europe, which it sees as betrayal of alleged US guarantees to not expand eastwards after Germany's reunification in 1990. In line with this argumentation, Russia invaded Georgia in 2008 to, allegedly, secure the autonomy rights of South Ossetians. In 2014, it annexed Crimea in violation of international law and in 2022, it started a full-fledged military intervention in the Ukraine.

When speaking about security politics in Eastern Europe, it is important to understand that this "East-West" dynamic is not the only issue for security politics in this region.

Firstly, state interests in this region are diverse and do not always align along the West-East dichotomy. While many Balkan countries e.g. apply for EU-membership, Euroscepticism has been growing there, as accession processes have taken a long time now. Other states are aligning more with other bigger states whose influence is growing, such as Turkey and China.

Secondly, local conflict dynamics matter. Even though secessionist movements such as in Georgia often run along lines of alignment to Russia or the respective government, these conflicts raise more complex questions of the right to self-determination. Additionally, non-traditional security threats such as radicalisation and violent extremism are growing, particularly in the Balkans, which need to be addressed.

This acknowledgment of complexity has important consequences for security politics. Local peacebuilding processes, e.g., become more important, as they can co-exist with unresolved tensions between Russia and "the West".

Future political action, be it at the EU, the UN, or the Munich Security Conference, will need to address questions such as:

- How can consequences that a changed policy towards Eastern Europe under the Trump administration will have on the region be addressed?
- What role can European institutions such as the EU or the OSCE play in the future?

Important specialist terminology

The term rapprochement describes the process of two groups, e.g. states, approaching each other and (re-)establishing relations.

These treaties include, among others, the Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany, the NATO-Russia Founding Act, and the Budapest Memorandum.

The NATO-Russia Council was established in 2002 for consultation, joint decision-making and joint action. It has not met since Russia's invasion of Ukraine (NATO).

The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) is the world's largest regional security organisation with 57 participating states (OSCE Factsheet).

Due to the right to self-determination, every people may decide, among others, on its form of state and government. Within existing states, partial self-determination can be secured through autonomy rights.

An annexation is a forced occupation of another state's territory. It is forbidden by international law (ICRC).