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Review Essay 99

Csaba Moldicz, *Geopolitics in Central Europe: Superpower Competition and Regional Dynamics*, Bloomsbury, 2023.

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An exploration into the contemporary geopolitical and geoeconomic dynamics of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has been a long-awaited addition to the academic literature and an ambitious feat, which Csaba Moldicz recognizes.¹ The main contribution of *Geopolitics in Central Europe* is that it acts as a catalyst for a deeper examination and critical discourse on the geopolitical complexities faced by CEE in its relationships with major global powers. Its organization is strategic, with integral empirical chapters dedicated to each of the “superpowers”—United States, China, Russia, and Germany—and the penultimate chapter providing an in-depth analysis of the CEE region. Moldicz’s aim is to guide readers through a comprehensive exploration of the geopolitical dynamics in CEE and the interactions with key global players, with an underlying narrative thread that depicts the region as the prey of the superpowers.

Chapter 1 provides a post-Cold War geopolitical score card with key developments in the region. Moldicz lays out the central premise of the nature of geopolitical competition by arguing “the region sits on the dividing line between the West and the East, so the countries of the region are more immediately forced to choose between the two camps” (24). In the author’s view, the primary interest of countries in CEE lies in avoiding such binary decisions, as any choice would impose limitations on their development path. However, his assessment is that competing powers in the region are indifferent to these concerns as their own “survival is at stake” (24). Chapter 2 then begins the focus on superpower influence by examining the evolution of US foreign policy in CEE. It delves into historical contexts, policy shifts, and the factors that have transformed the United States from “a reluctant to [an] assertive player” in the region, mainly because of the competition with China and Russia (25). It also problematizes transatlantic relations, especially in the context of European strategic autonomy (27-28).

¹ Andrew H. Dawson and Rick Fawn, *The Changing Geopolitics of Eastern Europe* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2002); Stefano Guzzini, ed., *The Return of Geopolitics in Europe?: Social Mechanisms and Foreign Policy Identity Crises* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Anders Aslund, *How Capitalism Was Built: The Transformation of Central and Eastern Europe, Russia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia*. (Cambridge University Press, 2013); Mitchell A. Orenstein, “Geopolitics of a Divided Europe,” *East European Politics and Societies* 29:2 (2015): 531-540; Marcin Kaczmarek and Jakub Jakóbowski, “China on Central-Eastern Europe: ‘16+ 1’ as Seen from Beijing,” *OSW Commentary* 166: (2015); Pavel Baev, “Russia and Central and Eastern Europe: Between Confrontation and Collusion,” *Russie.Nei.Visions* 97 (2016): 1-29; Katharina Bluhm and Mihai Varga, eds., *New Conservatives in Russia and East Central Europe* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018); Tamas Matura, “China–CEE Trade, Investment and Politics,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 71:3 (2019): 388-407; Jennifer Mitzen, “Anxious Community: EU as (in) Security Community,” in Catarina Kinnvall, Ian Manners and Jennifer Mitzen, eds., *Ontological Insecurity in the European Union* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2020): 145-165; Ryszard Zięba, ed., *Politics and Security of Central and Eastern Europe: Contemporary Challenges*. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023).

Chapter 3 focuses on China as the relative newcomer in the region, exploring its economic investments, diplomatic engagement, and strategic interests. It analyzes the motivations behind China's increased presence and the impact of this change on the geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape of the region. In a rather benign and questionable assessment, Moldicz claims "China has neither the need, nor the will, nor the power (political or military) to act as a major power in the Central European region. Rather, what China needs is to open up new markets and internationalize its economy" (54). This stands in contrast to the fact that China has thus far held joint military exercises with Russia in the Baltic Sea and that Chinese state-affiliated hacking groups remain a major source of cyberattacks against Europe.²

Chapter 4, which is dedicated to unraveling Russia's role in CEE, discusses Russia's geopolitical objectives, regional relationships, and the implications of its actions. It provides insights into the dynamics that are shaping a new geopolitical landscape, one which is akin to an "Iron Curtain," and the challenges and opportunities this poses for the region (75). Moldicz forecasts that "when it comes to Russian influence in the region, Russia's political and economic influence is bound to decline. The systematic downgrading of Russian economic relations will most likely be an integral part of the long-term strategy for foreign trade and relations in the region, even though this is contrary to the economic interests of these countries" (95). He also notes that the foreign policy responses of CEE countries to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine exhibited diversity and have been contingent on various factors, including historical ties with Russia, geographical proximity, relations with Ukraine, and economic dependencies related to trade and technology transfers.

Chapter 5 shifts focus to Germany and its role within the European Union, exploring how German policies influence the region within the broader context of the EU. It examines economic ties, political alliances, and the overall impact of Germany on EU policies towards CEE in the context of enlargement and after the "big bang" accession in 2004. Most of all, the chapter underscores that Germany's involvement in the region has predominantly been motivated by economic considerations, "tak(ing) advantage of the transformation period in the 1990s" (110). As Moldicz explains, the CEE countries have been

an ideal place for German companies to relocate assembly and production while keeping the high value-added areas of production (innovation, research and development, sales and customer service) in Germany. In addition to low costs and traditionally strong ties to these countries, it was knowledge of local cultures that led German companies, whose strengths lie in manufacturing, to reorganize their production in Central Europe (110).

As the last substantive chapter, chapter 6 serves as a critical juncture, drawing together insights from the preceding chapters to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the CEE region is positioned amidst these global powers. In this chapter, the author delves into the complexities of CEE's relationship with the EU. Moldicz examines the region's endeavors to catch up with economically advanced Western European nations, highlighting the intricacies involved in this pursuit. The chapter outlines CEE's reliance on a "dependent model," which involves external support for economic and developmental progress, along with the associated risks of overdependence on external sources and foreign companies (131). It also scrutinizes weaknesses in research and development, labor bargaining power, and provides a Hungarian case study to illustrate development challenges.

Shifting the focus to foreign policy, though also in chapter 6, Moldicz nods to the diversity of approaches within the region. The book uses Estonia as a case study reflecting foreign policies rooted in values, while Hungary serves as an example of strategies grounded in national interests. For instance, Estonia's decision to

² Andrew Higgins, "China and Russia Hold First Joint Naval Drill in the Baltic Sea," *New York Times* 25 (2017). Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/25/world/europe/china-russia-baltic-navy-exercises.html>; Antonia Hmaid, "Here to Stay"—Chinese State-Affiliated Hacking for Strategic Goals," *MERICs Report*. (MERICs, November 22, 2023). Retrieved from: https://merics.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/MERICs%20Report%20medium_Hacking.pdf.

leave 17+1 format of CEE-China cooperation in August 2022 is explained as having been motivated by the values-based foreign policy which emphasizes the importance of values such as “rules-based international order and human rights” following China’s growing cooperation with Russia (141). On the other hand, it presents Hungarian foreign policy as running counter to the Baltic approaches as it “explicitly supports the assertion of economic and political interests” (143). This comprehensive exploration sheds light on the intricate dynamics that have shaped Central Europe’s position within the EU, emphasizing economic challenges, foreign policy strategies, and the nuanced balance between dependence and sovereignty.

Overall, this commendable monograph promises more than it delivers. This may be due to the highly ambitious aim, which the author acknowledges, of exploring this rather diverse region in terms of its multiple relations with major powers, which prevents a comprehensive and nuanced reading of all of the topics involved.

In terms of the comparative analysis of superpowers, it is not clear whether the chosen “superpowers” are genuinely comparable entities, particularly with respect to the discussion of Germany. The complex and unique nature of Germany’s role within the European Union, to which the book’s CEE states all belong, is distinct from the more globally expansive policies of the United States, China, and Russia.³ In turn, this prompts reflection on the validity of drawing direct parallels. Germany’s influence is deeply interwoven with its EU membership, and its geopolitical strategy is intricately tied to regional dynamics.⁴ It is a matter for debate as to whether lumping Germany with these global superpowers in the analysis obscures the nuanced nature of its policies and global engagement. This raises a crucial point about the book’s methodological approach and whether such the juxtaposition of these four powers is conducive to a comprehensive understanding of Germany’s distinctive geopolitical role.

Similarly, the organization of chapters and sections, as well as the author’s heavy reliance on bullet points throughout the manuscript, are questionable. While such a format may be suitable for lecture notes or a draft review, its pervasive use in this research monograph preclude a more refined and cohesive presentation. The text is saturated with descriptive accounts and the paraphrasing of other scholars’ arguments, which raises doubts about the distinctive contribution of the work. These instances represent missed opportunities for a more coherent and insightful exploration, where the inclusion of primary data could have enriched the scholarly value of the arguments.

In some instances, Moldicz goes into the details of domestic politics when discussing how different political factions approach foreign policy and what this means for the major powers’ approach to the region. This potentially useful contribution is not done consistently across the select cases. For instance, the case of Russia contains a somewhat outdated taxonomy of Russian policy elites, and does not categorize the debate in Germany, while the case of the United States explains the broader grand strategic approaches under the recent US presidential administrations while dedicating very little space to discussing the implications for the region.⁵ For instance, it would have been valuable to consider how even under “a new wave of US

³ Bernhard Blumenau, “Breaking with Convention? Zeitenwende and the Traditional Pillars of German Foreign Policy,” *International Affairs* 98:6 (2022): 1895-1913.

⁴ Frank-Walter Steinmeier, “Germany’s new global role: Berlin steps up,” *Foreign Affairs* 95:4 (2016): 106-113; Vladimir Handl and William E. Paterson, “The Continuing Relevance of Germany’s Engine for CEE and the EU,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 46:3 (2013): 327-337; Simon Bulmer and William E. Paterson, *Germany and the European Union: Europe’s Reluctant Hegemon?* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018).

⁵ Michael McFaul, “What Are Russian Foreign Policy Objectives?” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (1999). Retrieved from: <https://carnegieendowment.org/1999/05/01/what-are-russian-foreign-policy-objectives-pub-424>.

isolationism,” (36) CEE countries were still able to forge close connections with the Trump administration and the US image there was more favorable compared to the polls from Western Europe.⁶

While the monograph does provide some much-needed empirical data, particularly in terms of trade and investment statistics, it does not present a comprehensive regional perspective. At some points in the book, and in particular in chapter 1, the data presentation has issues with clarity, making it harder for readers to interpret the results. Some of the discussions of macroeconomic trends lack specificity, with abrupt shifts between absolute and percentage terms in trade figures. Additionally, inconsistencies in presenting statistics, such as using a single currency instead of mixing euros and US dollars in a table (e.g., Table 1.5), and not clarifying whether the figures are in real or nominal terms, diminishes the impact and clarity of the data.

Importantly, there is no discussion in the book of the fact that the CEE region has progressively strengthened its collective voice through innovative diplomatic initiatives, such as the Three Seas Initiative (TSI).⁷ The lack of attention to such crucial developments reduces the region to one which is at the mercy of the whims of the major powers. Given the monograph’s focus on trade relations and issues of geoeconomics, one would have expected that it would mention the TSI’s ambitions and its record in the fields of energy, connectivity, and infrastructure development across the region.⁸

Other omissions in the discussion of specific superpower foreign-policy developments include the US European Deterrence Initiative (EDI), which since its creation in 2014 as the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) program has played a pivotal role in reintroducing American rotational forces to NATO’s eastern flank.⁹ The program includes substantial infrastructure projects, training exercises, and procurement initiatives. Operating in conjunction with NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP), which facilitated the deployment of multinational battalions to the Baltic states and Poland in 2017, the EDI has been a substantial change in US defense policy.¹⁰ It is not mentioned in the book.

Finally, rather than offering a holistic account of the CEE region, the narrative narrows its focus a few times to examples from Poland and Hungary, treating them as vignettes. This approach, while potentially illuminating for specific cases, leaves the broader context and diversity of the region relatively underexplored, and begs a more inclusive and representative analysis.

In conclusion, tackling the vast and intricate landscape of geopolitical developments within a single region, especially concerning its relations with major global powers, is an ambitious endeavor. The complexities involved in dissecting the multifaceted interactions between CEE and influential players like the United States, China, Russia, and Germany are indeed formidable. *Geopolitics in Central Europe* admirably undertakes this challenging task and recognizes the intricacies of each power’s role and impact on the region.

While the narrative may leave some aspects wanting and certain dimensions unexplored, it performs the commendable task of sparking a much-needed conversation on the contemporary geopolitical and

⁶ Jacob Poushter, *How People around the World See the US and Donald Trump in 10 Charts*. (Pew Research Center, 2020). Retrieved from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/01/08/how-people-around-the-world-see-the-u-s-and-donald-trump-in-10-charts/>.

⁷ Gorana Grgić, “The Changing Dynamics of Regionalism in Central and Eastern Europe: The Case of the Three Seas Initiative,” *Geopolitics* 28:1 (2021): 216-238; Ryszard Zięba. “Three Seas Initiative.” *Politics and Security of Central and Eastern Europe: Contemporary Challenges*. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023): 261-275.

⁸ “The Three Seas Initiative”, *The Atlantic Council* (2024). Retrieved from: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/programs/europe-center/the-three-seas-initiative/>.

⁹ Paul Belkin and Hibbah Kaileh, “The European Deterrence Initiative: A Budgetary Overview,” *Congressional Research Service*, IF10946, June 16 (2020).

¹⁰ Martin Zapfe, “Deterrence from the Ground Up: Understanding NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence,” *Survival* 59:3 (2017): 147-160.

gloeonomic dynamics in CEE. In doing so, the book has contributed to a broader understanding of the region's position on the global stage. This effort opens the door for further scholarly explorations and discussions, acknowledging that the evolving dynamics in this region require ongoing attention and analysis.

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