

Tomasz Klin\*

# Counterbalancing, accommodation, and hedging: NATO Eastern flank countries' political strategies towards Russia

**Przeciwwaga, akomodacja i zabezpieczanie: polityczne strategie krajów wschodniej flanki NATO wobec Rosji**

**Abstract:** The aim of the article is to diagnose the diversity of political strategies among NATO eastern flank countries towards Russia. The author identifies three major approaches: counterbalancing, which may take the form of containment, accommodation, and hedging. By analysing official security strategies and governmental actions, the article demonstrates the differences between each approach and considers their final consequences. The structure is as follows: firstly, to understand the essence of each political strategy and to consider the consequences as categories of international politics. Secondly, the article illustrates each approach by specific cases: Poland's counterbalancing, Hungary's accommodation and Bulgaria's hedging. The article concludes with the domestic and foreign conditions of these strategies, their costs, and their effectiveness.

**Keywords:** NATO eastern flank, foreign policy, counterbalancing, containment, accommodation, hedging

**Streszczenie:** Celem artykułu jest zdiagnozowanie zróżnicowania politycznych strategii krajów wschodniej flanki NATO wobec Rosji. Autor wyróżnia trzy główne podejścia: przeciwwagę, która może przyjąć formę powstrzymywania, akomodację oraz zabezpieczanie. Analizując oficjalne strategie bezpieczeństwa i działania rządowe, artykuł ukazuje różnice pomiędzy każdym z tych podejść i rozważa ich ostateczne konsekwencje. Struktura pracy jest następująca: po pierwsze, wyjaśnienie istoty każdej strategii politycznej oraz rozważenie ich konsekwencji jako kategorii w polityce międzynarodowej. Po drugie, artykuł ilustruje każde podejście poprzez konkretne przykłady: przeciwwaga w Polsce, akomodacja na Węgrzech oraz zabezpieczanie w Bułgarii. Artykuł kończy

\* Uniwersytet Wrocławski, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8630-4659>, e-mail: [tomasz.klin@uwr.edu.pl](mailto:tomasz.klin@uwr.edu.pl).

się analizą krajowych i zagranicznych uwarunkowań tych strategii, ich kosztów oraz skuteczności.

**Słowa kluczowe:** wschodnia flank NATO, polityka zagraniczna, przeciwwaga, powstrzymywanie, akomodacja, zabezpieczanie

## Introduction

Countries of the NATO eastern flank have experienced a specific security transformation for the last decade. The Russian attack on Ukraine in 2014 and then on a greater scale in 2022 eventually ended the post-Cold War period which allowed post-Warsaw Pact countries to focus on integration with the West's institutions and selectively contribute to their security challenges such as terrorism or human rights atrocities outside Europe. Since 2014, Russia's growth and expansion needed a response. Because the strategic position of NATO eastern flank countries is not homogenous, responses have varied; countries differ strongly according to material and military power, bordering (or not) Russia, and the history of international relations. Politically and ideologically distinct parties in power affect states' perspectives on foreign policy. For instance, liberal parties tend to criticise autocratic regimes whereas countries ruled by nationalists are involved in conflicts with their neighbours. Finally, Russia itself differentiated offers towards eastern flank countries due to its own subjective anticipation of the benefits but also along with material capabilities such as unequal distribution of energy infrastructure. On those foundations, NATO eastern flank countries chose various strategies towards Russia.

## 1. Theoretical remarks

Counterbalancing takes place when lesser powers want to defend their core interests or even their existence. The repeated pattern is joining one great power vis-à-vis another great power. This indicates the condition of similarity of strategies between a great power and a lesser power in the face of another great power's threat<sup>1</sup>. Importantly, counterbalancing is a strongly responsive strategy. The source of the threat takes steps perceived as dangerous which follows counterbalancing re-

1 R.S. Ross, *Balance of Power Politics and the Rise of China: Accommodation and Balancing in East Asia*, "Security Studies" 2006, vol. 15, no. 3.

sponses. Limits of counterbalancing result from a major power (in this case: Russia) having the potential for retaliation, anticipation of specific harmful activities, and limited resources, because counterbalancing is economically costly. A specific strategy of counterbalancing is containment which aims at preventing and stopping the expansion of an aggressive centre of power. Containment is the most common type of counterbalancing in the geostrategic context of Central and Eastern Europe. Another specific approach is soft balancing which finds expression through acts of establishing, using, or dominating international institutions<sup>2</sup> and this type of strategy was to some extent conducted by the CEE countries manifested in the establishment of the Three Seas Initiative and the Bucharest-9 group.

Accommodation consists in long-term improvement of diplomatic and economic relations with a potentially dangerous power. As correctly observed, accommodation is essentially reciprocal and thus different from counterbalancing. Accommodation requires flexibility, and using opportunities, and may imply some retreating<sup>3</sup>. Various scholars emphasise that accommodation is preferable by lesser powers<sup>4</sup> and that the uncertainty of power politics is more accurately reflected by accommodation than by counterbalancing or bandwagoning<sup>5</sup>. Certainly, accommodation is both a reflection of and a contribution to the rise of economic interdependence, an essential phenomenon of the post-Cold War era.

The origins of "hedging" lie in the financial domain. "To hedge" means to invest or buy multiple assets to reduce risks in potential losses<sup>6</sup>. As for international politics, hedging may result from the uncertainty of power transition between dominant powers<sup>7</sup>. Hedging

2 K. He, *Institutional Balancing and International Relations Theory: Economic Interdependence and Balance of Power Strategies in Southeast Asia*, "European Journal of International Relations" 2008, vol. 14, no. 3.

3 B. He, *Politics of Accommodation of the Rise of China: the case of Australia*, "Journal of Contemporary China" 2012, vol. 21, no. 73, pp. 55, 58-59.

4 R.S. Ross, *Balance of Power*...

5 J. Kirchner, *The tragedy of offensive realism: Classical realism and the rise of China*, "European Journal of International Relations" 2012, vol. 18, no. 1, p. 54.

6 S. De Silva, *Making Sense of the Haze: Hedging and its Attributes*, "University of Colombo Review" 2020, vol. 1, no. 1, p. 95.

7 V. Jackson, *Power, trust, and network complexity: three logics of hedging in Asian security*, "International Relations of the Asia-Pacific" 2014, vol. 14, no. 3.

serves as an alternative to both counterbalancing and bandwagoning<sup>8</sup>. Counterbalancing a major power can be too confrontational and may potentially deprive lesser powers of material gains from that major power, whereas bandwagoning entails the risk of exploitation and dominance or rapid abandonment by a major power.

In summary, both accommodation and hedging are intermediate strategies. Accommodation entails long-term economic collaboration, whereas hedging is a mix of policies which demonstrate no end goal and generate some uncertainty among major powers that hedging addresses. Contemporary states find many opportunities not to conduct clear pro-/contra- foreign policy. As a result, accommodation and hedging have become common strategies preferred by small and medium-sized states towards major powers.

## **2. Counterbalancing: the case of Poland**

Polish political elites demonstrated no consensus as to whether the Russian 5-day war with Georgia had been dangerous enough to start strong counterbalancing measures. Nonetheless, Poland started to prefer focussing on defence in its closest neighbourhood which materialised in the Polish armed forces' absence in the NATO intervention in Libya and in a reduction of military presence in Afghanistan and Iraq. Eventually, the annexation of Crimea was commonly perceived among Polish elites as uncovering Russia's imperialist face.

Polish policymakers consequently condemned the annexation of Crimea and Russia's support for separatists in Donbas. As a result of the 2014 security crisis, Poland suspended high-level meetings with Russian officials. The Law and Justice government which took power in 2015 went even further: it ceased visa-free border traffic with the Kaliningrad Oblast. The new energy strategy planned to discontinue long-term contracts for Russian gas after the expansion of the gas terminal in Świnoujście and a new pipeline from Denmark. Contemporary security strategy diagnosed the "reconstruction of Russia's powerhood at the expense of its neighbourhood and reinforcing its confronta-

8 C.-C. Kuik, *Getting hedging right: a small-state perspective*, "China International Strategy Review" 2021, vol. 3, no. 3.

tional policies”<sup>9</sup>. The recommended prescription was “consolidation of NATO around its defensive functions”<sup>10</sup> and the growth of the military budget to over 2% of GDP in the following fiscal years. After years of diplomatic effort, Poland achieved the establishment of the US-led NATO battle group near the “Suwałki corridor” and separately, US armed forces in other locations of the country. Meanwhile, Poland contributed to multifaceted assistance for Ukraine. It was the first country which sent “non-lethal” arms to Ukraine, namely body armour and munitions. As of 2016, Poland was the third largest global supplier of non-lethal weapons for Ukraine worth over 5.4 million USD<sup>11</sup>.

The continuity of the Donbas war by Russia led Poland to the following conclusion: “The most serious threat is the neo-imperial policy of the authorities of the Russian Federation conducted also by the use of military force”<sup>12</sup>. Hence the adaptation of the strategy towards open containment. Henceforth the goals should be “increasing and consolidating the North Atlantic Alliance’s military presence on its eastern flank”<sup>13</sup> and “strengthening deterrence and defence (towards Russia) with simultaneous readiness for engaging in conditional dialogue”<sup>14</sup>. After Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Poland continued this strategy, but its instruments were adjusted accordingly. Although Poland did not terminate diplomatic relations with Russia and did not decide to block all economic flows, the government expelled a record number of Russian diplomatic personnel. In the economic field, the authorities imposed unilateral sanctions on imports of Russian coal and pressed the whole EU to follow suit. Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki compared President Vladimir Putin with Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot. Consequently, Poland, along with Lithuania, Ukraine, and the EU, took part in the creation of the Joint Investigation Team for Russian war crimes in Ukraine. Such moral and legal

9 *Strategia Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, Warsaw 2014, art. 41, <https://www.bbn.gov.pl/ftp/SBN%20RP.pdf>.

10 *Ibid.*, art. 67.

11 P.A. Goble, *Friends in need: 18 countries who gave Ukraine non-lethal military aid*, Euromaidan Press, 5 August 2016, <https://euromaidanpress.com/2016/08/05/friends-in-need-18-country-who-supplied-ukraine-with-non-lethal-weapons/> [18.01.2024].

12 *Strategia Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, Warsaw 2020, p. 6, [https://www.bbn.gov.pl/ftp/dokumenty/Strategia\\_Bezpieczenstwa\\_Narodowego\\_RP\\_2020.pdf](https://www.bbn.gov.pl/ftp/dokumenty/Strategia_Bezpieczenstwa_Narodowego_RP_2020.pdf).

13 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

activities also serve for containment if their intention is to weaken or restrain the source of threat.

Importantly, Poland intensified its activities of counterbalancing in the field of security policy. A new parliamentary regulation indicated the schedule of growth of the military budget. Air defence systems became a priority after Russia's mass rocket and drone attacks on Ukrainian cities and its energy infrastructure. Furthermore, Poland focused on the growth and modernisation of its land forces after that turned out to remain the core of warfare in Ukraine. Some newly purchased weapons may have the potential for use as further military assistance for Ukraine. The build-up of strong armed forces may also serve to support close allies of Poland on the NATO eastern flank, mainly Baltic countries like Romania and Slovakia.

A successful result of diplomatic efforts was the US declaration on the permanent basing of the V Corps headquarters in Poznań. Poland also substantially reinforced its contribution to NATO's eastern flank by sending troops to Latvia and Romania and carrying out air policing over Slovakia. Soon, Poland became the second vice-leader, after the USA and UK, in the overall value of military assistance for Ukraine<sup>15</sup>. In particular, the Ukrainian army received over 300 tanks and the newest Polish 6-inch howitzers. The limits in confrontational containment policy were reflected in a diplomatic incident beginning with a proposal for the USA to accept sending MiG-29 aircraft to Ukraine via the US Rammstein airbase. The US authorities refused. Nevertheless, MiGs were delivered a year later.

Poland's diplomacy also worked on the intensification of military and economic assistance by other NATO and EU members. Its most controversial expression was applying moral pressure on Germany, blaming it for delays in weapon deliveries, accusing it of hidden pro-Russian intentions, and primarily of great moral responsibility for the war due to the large-scale imports of energy resources from Russia until 2022. Due to the invasion, Poland worsened its relations with Hungary, which was reflected by the Law and Justice Party leader

<sup>15</sup> *Poland is third largest donor of military aid to Ukraine*, Polskie Radio, 3 July 2022, <https://www.polskieradio.pl/395/9766/artykul/2992902,poland-third-largest-donor-of-military-aid-to-ukraine> [5.10.2024].

Jarosław Kaczyński's public disappointment over Viktor Orbán's attitude to the Russo-Ukrainian war<sup>16</sup>.

The limits of Poland's generosity towards Ukraine ended in summer 2023. Poland protested against unfair competition in the grain market and blocked access to Ukraine's imports. Prime Minister Morawiecki stressed Poland's self-defence instead of further assistance for Ukraine. This is explainable primarily by domestic factors such as the electoral campaign but also by the containment strategy. Retreat by Russia's armed forces from key front sections in Ukraine could have been perceived as a partial neutralisation of Russia's expansion in the period up to summer 2023.

### **3. Accommodation: the case of Hungary**

Initially, the Fidesz government of 2010–2014 did not reveal serious interest in cooperation with Russia, which was not even mentioned in the official security strategy<sup>17</sup>. The protracted Eurozone crisis certainly affected the gradual reformulation of foreign policy priorities. The fundamentals of Hungary's new approach were explicated by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in the Romanian Băile Tuşnad, the centre of the Hungarian minority: "[T]he most popular topic in thinking today is trying to understand how systems that are not Western, not liberal, not liberal democracies and perhaps not even democracies, can nevertheless make their nations successful. The stars of the international analysts today are Singapore, China, India, Russia and Turkey"<sup>18</sup>. The ideological emphasis was laid on national community, state sovereignty, and assertiveness. Simultaneously, the ruling Fidesz party tended to demonstrate a rising distrust for both the United States and the European Union as alleged opponents to conservative values.

16 *Polish leader criticises Hungary's stance on Ukraine war*, Polskie Radio, 8 April 2022, <https://www.polskieradio.pl/395/9766/artykul/2935898,polish-leader-criticises-hungary%E2%80%99s-stance-on-ukraine-war> [22.12.2023].

17 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary, *Hungary's National Security Strategy*, 2012, <https://eda.europa.eu/docs/default-source/documents/hungary-national-security-strategy-2012.pdf>.

18 V. Orbán, *Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp*, Website of the Hungarian Government, 30 July 2014, <https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp> [13.11.2023].

Contrary to European mainstream parties, Hungary's Fidesz did not perceive the annexation of Crimea as a dramatic change in European security. The emphasis was laid on the need for political dialogue with Russia, based on the following diagnosis: "The Russian Federation is one of the key actors in the international system, serving an indispensable role in managing several global and regional security issues"<sup>19</sup>. As a result, accommodation found expression in the official security strategy: "Hungary regards the maintenance of the cohesion of NATO and the EU to be one of its priorities, while it has an interest in the pragmatic development of Hungarian–Russian relations and economic cooperation"<sup>20</sup>.

Hungary's accommodation of Russia between 2014 and 2022 was manifested as attempted closeness in the domains of diplomacy and the energy sector and as restraints in some other domains. At the diplomatic level, Hungary's leaders made efforts to maintain cordial relations with their Russian counterparts, in particular with President Putin. Orbán personally met Putin several times and additionally, both leaders often exchanged congratulations on electoral victories by phone. The second most important personality in the government in this matter became Péter Szijjártó, whose power was strengthened by combining the domains of foreign affairs and trade into one ministry; Szijjártó paid visits to Russia mainly to facilitate economic interactions. This resulted in prioritizing the energy sector, i.e., the stability of gas and oil supply. It was also about prices, in some periods observably lower than for countries with geopolitical tensions with Russia such as Lithuania and Poland<sup>21</sup>. Hungary was the only EU country which agreed on the purchase of nuclear power plant facilities from the Russian company Rosatom, noticeably, financed by a Russian loan. Aside from cheap and long-term deliveries of energy, the ruling Fidesz encouraged the promotion of exports to Russia with limited effects. Also, Hungary attempted to improve its financial capabilities by re-

19 *Government Resolution 1163/2020 (21st April) on Hungary's National Security Strategy*, Honvédelmi Hírek, 21 June 2020, art. 118, <https://honvedelem.hu/hirek/government-resolution-1163-2020-21st-april.html> [11.12.2023].

20 Ibid.

21 M. Zaniewicz, *New Gas Pipeline Geopolitics in Central and Eastern Europe*, Warsaw Institute, 21 December 2019, <https://warsawinstitute.org/new-gas-pipeline-geopolitics-in-central-and-eastern-europe/> [18.11.2023].

storing its membership in the International Investment Bank and then by inviting the transfer of its seat from Moscow to Budapest.

In the period 2014–2021, there was one moment when NATO countries pressed Hungary to take stronger anti-Russian measures: the Skripal affair, when Russian intelligence attempted to assassinate its former agent on British territory using chemical poison. As a result, Hungary decided to expel one diplomat. Commentators assessed this move as a combination of prioritizing NATO and EU solidarity with limiting the discontent of Russia. It is worth adding that two of Hungary's neighbours, Slovakia and Slovenia, did not expel any Russian diplomats due to the Skripal affair, while two more, Croatia and Romania, also withdrew one diplomat each<sup>22</sup>. To conclude, Hungary did not avoid rare and restrained confrontational steps against Russia to satisfy important NATO allies. This shows how accommodation aims to improve relations, not to replace major allies.

As mentioned earlier, accommodation as a strategy consists of using opportunities which are not always predictable. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Hungary was the only EU member which purchased vaccines from Russia and, contrary to Slovakia, did not withdraw from this decision. The government justified their decision to import vaccines from Russia by the urgent need for as many vaccines as possible<sup>23</sup>. Another case of opportunism was Hungary's open permission for Russia to use Hungary's airspace to deliver arms to Serbia. All these decisions by Orbán supported the pro-Russian discourse such as saying that Putin "rules a great and ancient empire"<sup>24</sup>.

An essential element of the accommodation strategy is avoiding, reducing, or at least postponing unfriendly measures. According to informal sources, Hungary did not strongly oppose Russia's intelligence

22 A. Chughtai, M. Petkova, *Skripal case diplomatic expulsions in numbers*, Al Jazeera, 3 April 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/4/3/skripal-case-diplomatic-expulsions-in-numbers> [21.11.2013].

23 K. Than, A. Komuves, *Hungary buys Russia's Sputnik V vaccine, first in EU, minister says*, Reuters, 22 January 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-hungary-russia-idUSKBN29RoWB/> [21.11.2023].

24 As quoted in D. Janjevic, *Vladimir Putin and Viktor Orban's special relationship*, Deutsche Welle, 18 September 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/vladimir-putin-and-viktor-orbans-special-relationship/a-45512712> [28.06.2022].

activities on its territory<sup>25</sup>, which provides a clear example of restraint. Hungary's accommodation towards Russia was conducted within the Western structures of NATO and the European Union. Delaying could serve as a signal for Russia that worsening relations in one specific sector does not change the overall will to promote large-scale economic cooperation. Accordingly, Hungary postponed many EU sanctions towards Russia but ultimately did not oppose most of them.

Although the key factor of accommodation lies in material exchange, under conditions of NATO and EU membership, Hungary often used communicative actions towards Russia to appease it. Numerous public doubts regarding EU sanctions towards Russia became Hungary's standard. As for increasing the defence budget, which doubled between 2014 and 2020, the official reasons given were mass migration and other circumstances unrelated to Russia's expansion<sup>26</sup>. Notably, Hungary was the only NATO member without substantial military support to other NATO eastern flank countries, although it sent infantry for exercises in Baltic countries and its combat aircraft contributed to Baltic Air Policing. Notably, once Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, Hungary started to alter its strategy to a more hedging-like approach. This change has taken place under strong, consistent, and multilateral pressures within NATO and it is too early to assess its final shape.

## 4. Hedging: the case of Bulgaria

To start this analysis, it is worth considering the conditions for conducting policies in Bulgaria that profoundly differ from both Poland and Hungary. Bulgaria has been the least developed country among EU members, so its resources have been more limited. The country suffered from political instability including repeated governmental crises and in 2021–22 also repeated indecisive elections. Finally, Bulgarian society has had strong pro-Russian tendencies, which resulted

25 J. Dettmer, *Former Spy: Hungary Used as Logistical Base for Russian Intelligence Activity*, VOA News, 17 April 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/a/former-spy-hungary-used-as-logistical-base-for-russian-intelligence-activity/4879742.html> [13.11.2023].

26 *Govt To Increase Defence Spending by 30 Percent Next Year*, Hungary Today, 25 September 2021, <https://hungarytoday.hu/govt-increase-defence-spending-30-percent-next-year/> [21.11.2023].

from positive historical experiences, as well as cultural and religious similarities<sup>27</sup>.

The foreign policy orientation of Bulgaria was explicated in the official security strategy published in 2011, intended to remain valid for the whole decade. The document was created under a government led by the GERB party which has been most influential in the Bulgarian political arena, so it is safe to regard it as a credible source of the state's general intentions. The Strategy strongly emphasises the country belonging to Western structures such as NATO and the EU and accepting and implementing their core values. Bulgaria aimed to take "an active part in the establishment and maintenance of EU and NATO relations with the Russian Federation"<sup>28</sup>, but the document adds that they should be based on the values of the UN Charter and Western organisations. This as such does not necessarily entail hedging, however, prioritising Western values clearly excludes acceptance of Russia's hegemonic and imperialist conduct. Bulgaria's hedging is manifested in the intention to diversify sources of energy including projects for gas pipelines promoted by both the EU and Russia<sup>29</sup>.

The annexation of Crimea and the initiation of the Donbas war by Russia were met with criticism among Bulgarian policymakers. This resulted also from the pro-western stance of leading Bulgarian officials including President Rosen Plevneliev, associated with GERB, who accused Russia of undermining "the foundations of the European Union – unity, solidarity, and the rule of law"<sup>30</sup>. Some direct collisions of Russo-Bulgarian interests entailed verbal criticism such as Bulgarian officials' public condemnation of Russia for its interpretation of the origins of the Cyrillic alphabet, which was said to come from Macedonia, not Bulgaria<sup>31</sup>. However, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) intend-

27 J. Pierkowski, *Bulgarian-Russian Relations: Between Sentiment and Pragmatism*, "Bulletin PISM" 2019, no. 177.

28 *National Security Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria*, 2011, art. 131, [https://www.bbn.gov.pl/ftp/dok/07/BGR\\_National\\_Security\\_Strategy\\_Republic\\_Bulgaria\\_2011.pdf](https://www.bbn.gov.pl/ftp/dok/07/BGR_National_Security_Strategy_Republic_Bulgaria_2011.pdf).

29 *Ibid.*, art. 93.

30 As quoted in H. Cooper, C. Oliver, *Bulgaria caught between NATO and the Kremlin*, Politico, 12 September 2016, <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-bulgaria-presidential-election-rumen-radev-socialists-caught-between-nato-and-the-kremlin/> [8.12.2023].

31 M. Cheresheva, *Putin's Homage to Cyrillic Makes Bulgarians See Red*, Balkan Insight, 25 May 2017, <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/05/25/kremlin-s-stance-on-cyrillic-origin-angers-sofia-05-25-2017/> [8.12.2023].

ed to continue the exploitation of pro-Russian resentments and attempted to improve relations with Russia. An important event was the visit of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev to Sofia in 2019, who met with top officials including President Rumen Radev, associated with the BSP, and Prime Minister Borisov, the leader of GERB. Contrary to that friendly atmosphere, Bulgaria conducted investigations into spying and expelled several Russian diplomats in 2020. On the other hand, Bulgarian authorities gave multiple permissions to use Bulgarian airspace for Russian military deliveries to Serbia<sup>32</sup>.

As for Bulgaria's dependence on Russian energy resources, after some insistence by the European Commission, the authorities abandoned the Russian South Stream project. Instead, Bulgaria soon approved the connection to the Turk Stream pipeline via a new leg along with Russia and some Balkan countries' interests. A notable discursive change took place under President Radev who de facto approved the annexation of Crimea<sup>33</sup>. Bulgaria was also cautious about openly taking pro-Ukrainian steps until 2022/2023. In this regard, the visit of Prime Minister Borisov to Kyiv was the only example at this diplomatic level. The Vrbětice affair in Czechia demonstrated that Bulgaria allowed for commercial sales of munitions to Ukraine but without official support.

As a result of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Bulgarian policy seemed to remain inconsistent. In April 2022, the government refused to pay in Russian Rubles and thus the country lost all the gas supply delivered directly from Russia. Seemingly, this decision led to the discontinuation of hedging, although gas could be still imported indirectly via Turkey.

In summer 2022, Bulgaria blocked access to Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov's airplane, as a result, his visit to Belgrade was cancelled. Further, recalling security reasons, the government expelled 70 persons from the Russian embassy, which was the most unfriendly

32 *Russia 'Used Bulgarian Airspace' To Deliver Military Equipment To Serbia*, Radio Free Europe, 17 December 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-planes-bulgarian-airspace-military-equipment-serbia/31006388.html> [23.12.2023].

33 S. Todorov, *Ukraine Queries Bulgarian President's 'Crimea is Russian' Remark*, Balkan Insight, 19 November 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/11/19/ukraine-queries-bulgarian-presidents-crimea-is-russian-remark/> [8.12.2023].

step towards Russia in the field of diplomacy in the EU<sup>34</sup>. Simultaneously, however, the invasion revealed discrepancies amidst the ruling coalition towards Ukraine: Prime Minister Kiril Petkov, from the pro-western party We Continue the Change, declared sending military aid for Ukraine, however, deputy prime minister Kornelia Ninova from BSP denied this<sup>35</sup>. More visible inconsistency resulted from the discourse of Bulgaria's president; while Radev supported the appeal of EU swift candidate status for Ukraine, nonetheless, he also emphasised cautiousness in providing Ukraine with weapons, preferring protective equipment, explained by an apprehensiveness of the situation for Bulgarian citizens in Ukraine<sup>36</sup>. Until the end of 2022, Bulgaria's official military assistance for Ukraine consisted mainly of repairing Ukrainian weapons. Petkov responded to Ukraine's pleas by saying: "We've done enough and we'll continue to support Ukraine"<sup>37</sup>. As the media revealed at the beginning of 2023, Bulgaria had delivered much larger contributions than declared<sup>38</sup>. This suggests a tacit reformulation of Bulgaria's strategy into counterbalancing.

However, even in 2023 elements of hedging were observable among the official discourse. Radev argued that military assistance for Ukraine could not bring positive effects and that there was no military solution to the war. He also asserted that Ukraine's will to fight against Russia led to "the bill...paid by the whole of Europe"<sup>39</sup>. Those statements met with a critical response from members of the pro-western government such as Prime Minister Nikolai Denkov. Bulgaria's hedging seemed

34 *Seventy expelled Russian diplomats leave Bulgaria*, Euractiv, 4 July 2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/seventy-expelled-russian-diplomats-leave-bulgaria/> [18.01.2024].

35 N. Krassen, *Bulgarian government row over military aid to Ukraine*, 28 February 2022, [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/bulgarian-government-row-over-military-aid-to-ukraine/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/bulgarian-government-row-over-military-aid-to-ukraine/) [18.08.2022].

36 *President Rumen Radev: Bulgaria will continue to help Ukraine according to our ability*, Radio Bulgaria, 21 April 2022, <https://bnr.bg/en/post/101636020/president-rumen-radev-bulgaria-will-continue-to-help-ukraine-according-to-our-ability> [9.12.2023].

37 As quoted in S. Todorov, *'We Have Done Enough': Bulgaria Rejects Ukraine's Plea for Heavy Weapons*, Balkan Insight, 7 June 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/06/07/we-have-done-enough-bulgaria-rejects-ukraines-plea-for-heavy-weapons/> [22.12.2023].

38 P. Volkmann-Schluck, *Bulgaria to the rescue: How the EU's poorest country secretly saved Ukraine*, Politico, 18 January 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/bulgaria-volodymyr-zelenskyy-kiril-petkov-poorest-country-eu-ukraine/> [8.12.2023].

39 As quoted in J. Hayden, *Ukraine blasts Bulgaria president's claims that Kyiv is to blame for the war*, Politico, 16 July 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/rumen-radev-bulgaria-president-ukraine-war/> [6.12.2023].

to be initially an intended long-term strategy towards Russia, nonetheless, as a result of the domestic political divisions and the design of key state institutions, i.e., the relatively strong position of the president in foreign and defence policy, it transformed into a by-product, an unintended systemic outcome. Furthermore, the rise of unfriendly steps towards Russia in 2022–2023 suggests that most of the Bulgarian elites diagnosed their hedging strategy as ineffective or incoherent as a response to Russia's aggression.

## 5. Final analysis

Each of the three strategies was built upon different domestic conditions. In Poland since the post-communist transition, policymakers have chosen a pro-western orientation and perceive Russia as a serious threat to their independence. Despite the intensity of domestic political conflicts in Poland, they reflect only selected elements of foreign relations<sup>40</sup>. The strategy resulted from bordering the source of the perceived threat, namely Russia, and allying with the group of friendly countries that facilitate counterbalancing. In the case of Hungary, an important ideological condition is including the Hungarian diaspora in neighbouring countries in the national community. This has triggered diplomatic tensions with Romania, Slovakia, and Ukraine, but not Russia. The logic of national identity thereby shapes the threat perception. The case of Bulgaria demonstrates that hedging can be both a conscious choice and a systemic outcome of divisions among political elites. Also, Bulgaria's limited economic resources supported its reluctance to apply open counterbalancing.

The cost of counterbalancing/containment varies according to the logic of responses. Modernisation of the armed forces and military assistance for allies in need can be expensive, but before 2022, Poland bore only a small cost. Additional losses resulted from Russia's economic countersanctions or "hybrid" threats such as support for illegal migration. As long as counterbalancing is assisted by wealthy and powerful allies and deterrence works effectively, which means there

40 T. Pawłuszko, *The Foreign Policy of Poland and the Problem of Political Rationale*, "Teoria Polityki" 2022, no. 6, pp. 241–244.

is no war, then the cost of counterbalancing is not very high. The logic of accommodation differs from counterbalancing. A lack of stress on military expenses contributes to a lower cost of accommodation. Because it consists of promoting economic relations, as such it brings material benefits. The assessment of its effectiveness could be more problematic if the source of threat starts invading neighbouring countries and the country which applies accommodation faces strong diplomatic pressure from his/her closest allies. At the moment of war, it would be difficult to assess the effectiveness of accommodation and probably the Fidesz elite itself has not concluded its validity. It is also difficult to assess the costs of hedging. Scholars have no insight into Bulgarian policymakers' motives behind the mass expulsions of Russian diplomats and the objection to Ruble payments for gas imports. If these steps resulted from disappointment with Russia, it might suggest the ineffectiveness of hedging in front of the radical revision of Russia's strategy.

Even though the invasion of Ukraine was perceived as a dramatic change in European security, habits linked with specific strategies remained. Poland simply strengthened its counterbalancing effort. Bulgaria is likely to fully resign from the previous hedging strategy, but its hedging-like *modus operandi* has still been observable among many counterbalancing measures. Hungary underwent some Western leaders' pressure and inconsistently adjusted its approach, but did not discard the general vision of collaboration with Russia as a great power. Certainly, the outcome of the Russo-Ukrainian war will shape the choice of strategy among NATO eastern flank countries.

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