

Growing opposition in Central & Eastern Europe to the U.S. proxy war in Ukraine

written by Dennis Barton and Paul Taylor
April 9, 2024



The victory of Peter Pellegrini in the Slovakian presidential election [6 April] consolidates the opposition in Central & Eastern Europe (CEE) to the U.S.-led proxy war in Ukraine.

Pellegrini [won](#) decisively with 53.26% of the vote. The 61.14% turn-out was the highest in a second round since 1999. He campaigned for peace and against sending

arms to Ukraine. His opponent was backed by pro-NATO voices in Slovakia and beyond.

Division in the Visegrad 4

The recent meeting of the Visegrad 4 – Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia – also highlighted the [deep divisions](#) in Central and Eastern Europe over the U.S. proxy war in Ukraine.

Czechia and Poland reiterated their commitment to supply Ukraine with arms and ammunition. These governments are ratcheting up war propaganda, with the new Polish prime minister, Donald Tusk, even claiming that Europe is in a “pre-war era.”

However, Hungary and Slovakia reaffirmed that the war can only be ended through negotiation. The Hungarian Foreign Minister said that his country “has not and will not supply any weapons to Ukraine.” At the same time, he called statements about sending troops to Ukraine “dangerous.” Slovakia won’t join the Czech Republic’s initiative to buy ammunition for Ukraine from third countries, according to Foreign Minister Juraj Blanár.

War weariness

The divisions between the CEE governments are symptomatic of a growing war weariness across Europe. Implementing the EU’s proposals to move the European arms industry to a “war economy mode” will accelerate that trend as more resources are diverted towards military spending.

At the end of February, [Deutsche Welle](#) reported on a survey by the European Council on Foreign Relations of 17,000 people in 12 European countries. The survey showed that 10% of Europeans think Ukraine will be victorious and 20% that Russia will win. Most significantly, 41% believe that Europe should pressure Ukraine to negotiate.

European NATO countries are already having serious difficulty [recruiting and retaining](#) military personnel. Talk of more conscription comes with a price tag – increased military spending and the potential for greater support for peace rather than war.

There is a growing atmosphere of political dissatisfaction in CEE, including in countries with hawkish NATO leadership. For example, a poll in Czechia revealed that “up to 80% of the population believes that the current political situation is bad.”

In Poland, [75%](#) of the population is against sending soldiers from Poland or other NATO countries to Ukraine.

Guns, not butter

The recent [summit](#) of European countries in Paris reached a consensus to send more weapons, ammunition, and air defense systems to Ukraine. The message was clear: the war should continue as long as it takes for a Ukrainian victory. However, with no victory in sight, the leaderships of most European countries have decided to continue supporting a Ukrainian war at all costs, with less money available for investment and social and environmental matters. The combined [military budgets](#) of the European Union’s 27 members are set to rise to 350 billion euros this year, which is around 60% higher than that spent in 2021.

Poland is leading this surge in military spending – currently committing around 4% of its GDP to its military budget. [Radio Poland](#) reported that the country is one of the world’s leading purchasers of U.S. weapons and military equipment. In the previous fiscal year, Poland bought \$12bn worth of Apache helicopters from the United States, \$10bn high mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) and \$3.75bn M1A1 Abrams tanks. It also spent \$4bn on integrated air and missile defense command systems.

After President Andrzej Duda and Prime Minister Donald Tusk traveled to Washington on 12 March to meet with President Joe Biden, they returned with a \$2bn loan to purchase 96 AH-64 attack helicopters.

NATO escalation

The prospect of a Trump presidency and his demand that Europe pay more for its role in the international division of labor in support of U.S. imperialism has added greater urgency and stridency to the rhetoric of Europe's NATO hawks.

From January to May this year, around 90,000 troops from all NATO countries will conduct maneuvers as part of Operation Steadfast Defender. Phase one is in the Atlantic and Arctic, and phase two is from the "Arctic to the Eastern Flank."

The "Operation" is about projecting U.S. power in Europe. The eastward expansion of NATO after the collapse of the Soviet Union goes hand in hand with the long-term U.S. goal to keep Russia from uniting with the rest of Europe. Subordination to the U.S. is also crucial to maintaining the latter's global supremacy. Fresh from destroying the EU's access to cheap Russian energy, the U.S. is also disrupting attempts by Europe to trade with the most dynamic country in the world economy, China. The price for adoption of the U.S. security stranglehold in Europe through NATO is economic decline, loss of trade, high energy costs, militarisation, political division, and insecurity.

Cost of subordination

Poland plays a crucial role in opposing the voices for peace in CEE and beyond. The revival of the so-called Weimar Triangle between Poland, France, and Germany added weight to those who supported war rather than negotiation.

French President Francois Macron's [statement](#) that the option of sending his country's troops to Ukraine could not be excluded was echoed by Polish foreign

minister Sikorski's view that Western troops in Ukraine are "not something unthinkable." For the moment, the German Chancellor, Olaf Scholz, has ruled out such an option.

Polish Foreign Minister Sikorski revealed the economic burden on Europe for its subordination to the U.S.. He was recently in the U.S. lobbying for more money and arms for Ukraine.

He noted how Ukraine had fought a war against Russia without "American troops firing a single shot" and that most of the money provided "is spent here in the United States. According to some analyses, up to 90% goes directly to create American jobs on American soil. ... [with] 117 production lines in at least 31 states and 71 cities where Americans are producing major weapons systems for Ukraine." You can find them in deeply blue states like California, deeply red states like Mississippi, and purple states like Pennsylvania or Ohio, where Abrams tanks are made, which Poland, for example, is also buying. Much of the newly made equipment ends up not in Ukraine but in the hands of American soldiers. It replaces stockpiles of older weaponry already sent to help defeat Putin's invasion." Sikorski added, "Europe as a whole has placed ninety billion dollars of fresh orders in the United States."

Sikorski's thoughts were echoed by NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenburg on a visit to the Lockheed Martin Facility in Alabama in January. He said, "Over the last two years alone, NATO Allies have agreed to buy 120 billion dollars' worth of weapons from U.S. defence industry. And that also includes also from you. ... So from Arizona to Virginia, Florida to Washington State, And right here in Alabama, American jobs depend on American sales to defence markets across Europe and Canada."

United States domination

Across the globe, the U.S. uses its military ascendancy to compensate for its relative economic decline. Its proxy war against Russia forces Europe to place so-called security above its economic interests.

The long-term U.S. plan is to integrate Ukraine into its orbit, including membership in NATO and the EU, thereby strengthening U.S. domination in Europe. Ukraine is not only a U.S. military spearhead in Europe but also a neoliberal economic one, including in food production.

However, winning popular support for Ukraine's EU membership is undermined by resistance in CEE and elsewhere in Europe to imports of Ukrainian grain. After 2014, U.S. monopolies began dominating Ukrainian agriculture. Ukraine's grain is produced without the environmental and food safety costs of farmers in the EU. Despite their pro-war rhetoric, Poland and France have been leading efforts to [place caps](#) on Ukrainian imports.

Farmers' protests in CEE are a visible sign of resistance to the rise of U.S. agribusiness in Ukraine. Although the Polish government is talking about a 'pre-war' situation and the need to move the economy onto a war footing, it has still been compelled to call on the EU to stop imports of Ukrainian grain. Divisions are growing between Poland and Ukraine on this matter. The Tusk government is in a dilemma: support Ukraine but simultaneously address the demands of Polish farmers. These tensions are being exacerbated by the recent local government and upcoming European elections. They reveal how the demands placed on Europe by the U.S. are causing internal political divisions even amongst its staunchest allies.

The left

If the military conflict in Ukraine were to expand and intensify, it would be countries such as Poland and not the U.S. or even France that would stand on the front line and be most at risk. The CEE countries are split on how to go forward; even those

who most ardently support Ukraine are being forced to make concessions due to the economic costs of war and sanctions. It is vital that European countries should use all diplomatic means to find a political solution to the war in Ukraine.

The rise of far-right forces capitalizing on some of the consequences of Europe's subordination to the U.S., alongside other fake friends of the people like Orban, brings into sharp relief the failure of the left to oppose the expansion of NATO and the drive to a "war economy."

In the months ahead, the divide in Europe over Ukraine is set to continue. A left in CEE and elsewhere that fails to unite opposition to U.S. global primacy, militarism, austerity, and racism will be a marginal force at best.

[Source](#)

