

Balancing NATO Commitments and Independent Policies: Eastern European Countries' Responses to the Gaza Crisis with Consideration of Iran's Role

Shohreh Pirani

Associate Professor, Department of Political Science and Islamic Revolution Studies, Shahed University, Tehran, Iran (Corresponding author).


sh.pirani@shahed.ac.ir

 0000-0001-8287-2600

Sajjad Sharif Asgari

Master's student in International Relations, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran.

sajjad.sharif@ut.ac.ir

 0009-0001-5768-3792

Milad Zraatkar

Master's student in International Relations, Faculty of International Relations, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tehran, Iran.

miladzraatkar@gmail.com

 0006-0006-1094-9529

Abstract

This research examines how Eastern European countries navigate NATO commitments and independent policies in response to the Gaza crisis, with special attention to Iran's role in this context. The findings reveal that Eastern European countries, despite structural limitations, maintain significant autonomy in their foreign policy. These countries have shown diverse responses to the Gaza crisis, reflecting a combination of security considerations, economic interests, domestic political constraints, and historical and cultural influences. Iran's role as a key regional actor in the Middle East constitutes an important variable in the foreign policy calculations of these countries. A comparative analysis of official positions and diplomatic actions highlights a significant gap between discourse and practice. The pattern of Eastern European countries' responses to the Gaza crisis provides a deeper understanding of foreign policy dynamics in the region and offers a framework for future analyses that incorporate the "Iran factor" in Eastern European foreign policy calculations.

Keywords: Eastern Europe, Gaza crisis, Foreign policy, NATO, Iran.

Introduction

The recent conflict in the Gaza Strip, which intensified in October 2023, has created one of the most complex geopolitical crises in the Middle East in the past decade. This crisis has affected not only the regional level but also the international arena, compelling various countries to take positions and respond. Among these, the responses of Eastern European countries, which are members of NATO and the European Union, demonstrate particular complexities that require careful examination. Additionally, Iran, as a key player in the Middle East's geopolitical landscape, has significantly influenced the dynamics of this crisis and subsequently shaped how Eastern European countries formulate their positions.

Eastern European countries have undergone a significant political and security transition since joining NATO and the European Union after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. These countries face security concerns stemming from their proximity to Russia, on one hand, and identity challenges in crafting an independent foreign policy, on the other. In this context, the Gaza crisis serves as a test to measure the degree of autonomy or compliance of these countries with the broader policies of NATO and the European Union. Furthermore, their historical and contemporary relations with Iran - a significant regional actor in the Middle East with distinct positions on the Gaza conflict - add another layer of complexity to their policy formulation.

The main issue of the present research is to explain and analyze how Eastern European countries manage the conflict between alliance commitments and independent tendencies in their foreign policy regarding the Gaza crisis, with particular attention to how Iran's role in the region influences their positions. This research seeks to answer the fundamental question: "How have Eastern European countries balanced following NATO and EU policy lines with pursuing their independent policies in response to the Gaza crisis, and to what extent has Iran's position and influence shaped these responses?"

The significance of this research is noteworthy from several perspectives: First, examining this issue can contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics of smaller countries' foreign policies within the framework of larger alliances. Second, analyzing this issue can reveal existing gaps in the cohesion of EU foreign policy. Third, this research can help identify the factors influencing the formation of Eastern European countries' foreign policies toward Middle Eastern conflicts more precisely. Fourth, it provides insight into how regional

powers like Iran can influence the foreign policy calculations of countries outside their immediate region, particularly when these countries must balance multiple international commitments.

The diverse reactions of Eastern European countries to the Gaza crisis, ranging from overt support for Israel by some to more critical positions by others, indicate significant differences in these countries' foreign policy approaches. These differences are influenced by various factors such as historical relations with Israel and Palestine, security considerations, economic interests, domestic public opinion pressures, and geopolitical position. Additionally, their stance on Iran's role in the conflict and their bilateral relations with Iran constitute another important variable that shapes their overall approach to the crisis.

This research employs theoretical frameworks of the balance of power, role theory in international relations, and regional security complex theory to analyze this phenomenon. Additionally, through the use of mixed methods and multiple case studies, it examines the behavioral patterns of Eastern European countries regarding the Gaza crisis and considers how their relations with Iran affect these patterns.

The innovation of this research lies in the simultaneous analysis of domestic and foreign policy dimensions of Eastern European countries, as well as in examining the impact of historical, cultural, and identity factors on the formation of these countries' positions on the Gaza crisis. Moreover, this study aims to provide a perspective on future trends in these countries' foreign policies regarding Middle Eastern conflicts, with special attention to how Iran's regional influence might shape their approaches in the long term.

In the continuation of this chapter, after reviewing the existing literature, the theoretical framework of the research is explained, followed by an examination of the historical context of Eastern European countries' relations with Israel and Palestine, as well as their evolving relations with Iran, which provides the necessary background for detailed analyses in subsequent chapters.

Examining the historical context of Eastern European countries' relations with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is key to understanding their current positions regarding the Gaza conflict. These relations have undergone remarkable transformations over the past decades, moving from unified support for Palestine during the Soviet era toward more diverse and complex approaches in the post-communist period and after NATO membership. Multiple factors, such as historical legacy, geopolitical developments, cultural ties, security considerations, and economic interests, have all played

roles in shaping these relationships. Understanding this historical background helps to comprehend how Eastern European countries have found themselves in a unique position, sometimes caught between loyalty to Western allies, domestic security considerations, and the desire for independence in foreign policy.

1. Historical Context of Eastern European Relations with Israel, Palestine, and Iran

1-1. Relations with Israel and Palestine before NATO membership

The relations of Eastern European countries with Israel and Palestine in the period before NATO membership were largely influenced by Eastern Bloc policies. Govrin (2011) in his comprehensive research demonstrates that these relations can be divided into three distinct periods: initial recognition and positive relations (1948-1953), increasing tension (1953-1967), and complete severance of relations (1967-1989). In the first phase, all Eastern European countries quickly recognized the State of Israel due to Israel's initial socialist tendencies and the Soviet hope for influence in the Middle East. With the intensification of the Cold War and Israel's Western orientation, the second phase began, characterized by increasing restrictions in relations. The turning point occurred during the Six-Day War of 1967, when, at Moscow's directive, all Eastern European countries except Romania severed diplomatic relations with Israel. During this period, diplomatic focus shifted toward supporting the Palestine Liberation Organization. With the beginning of Gorbachev's reforms in the late 1980s and then the collapse of the Soviet Union, a new phase emerged. Eastern European countries, in an effort to integrate into the Western community, gradually restored their relations with Israel. Hungary and Poland were the pioneers of this transformation, which was gradually followed by other countries in the region.

1-2. NATO expansion and foreign policy changes

NATO's expansion toward Eastern Europe following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marks a turning point in the foreign policy of countries in this region. The first wave of accession began in 1999 with the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland, and continued in 2004 with the membership of Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia (Asmus, 2002, p. 298). This expansion caused fundamental changes in the foreign policy approaches of these countries. Upon joining NATO, Eastern

European countries redefined their policies with a focus on Western integration. This transformation was accompanied by the alignment of diplomatic positions with the United States and Western European powers regarding Middle East issues, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The traditional support of some of these countries for Palestine during the communist era shifted toward a more balanced position and, in some cases, support for Israel (Tulmets & Kratochvíl, 2010, p. 112). This reorientation was not only due to NATO membership requirements but also reflected these countries' desire to break from their communist past and establish a new identity in the international arena. In particular, concerns about the Russian threat led these countries to prioritize security relations with the United States, which in turn influenced their approach to Middle East issues.

1-3. Recent Gaza conflicts (October 2023)

The Gaza conflicts that began in October 2023 with Hamas's attack on Israel presented Eastern European countries with the challenge of positioning themselves between traditional support for Israel and humanitarian concerns. In the early days, the reactions of these countries were generally aligned with the positions of the United States and Western allies. Poland, the Czech Republic, and the Baltic states explicitly recognized Israel's right to self-defense, while Hungary took a distinctive position by condemning Hamas while emphasizing the need for Israeli restraint.

As Israel's military operations expanded and Palestinian civilian casualties increased, policy divides in the region became apparent. The Visegrád countries (Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia), which had previously shared common positions on migration and refugees, experienced divergence regarding the Gaza crisis. Romania and Bulgaria also acted with greater caution, maintaining a balance between NATO solidarity and domestic considerations.

Public opinion in Eastern European countries - contrary to official government positions - showed greater sympathy for Palestinians, especially with increased media coverage of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. This gap between official positions and public opinion created domestic challenges for governments in the region and prepared the ground for a gradual moderation of official positions.

2. Case Studies of Selected Eastern European Countries

• Poland: Atlantic solidarity and European integration

Poland, as the largest Eastern European country that is a member of both NATO and the European Union, presents an interesting example of balance between Atlantic solidarity and European integration. Poland's historical relations with Israel and Palestine are rooted in the complex legacy of anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, and the migration of Polish Jews to Israel. The history of Poland's relations with Israel in the post-Cold War era shows increasing closeness, especially in security and economic fields (Dostál & Végh, 2019, pp. 50-52). In recent years, Poland has consistently been among the United States' closest allies in Europe. However, the pattern of Poland's reactions to the Gaza crisis following the attacks of October 7, 2023, demonstrates the complexity of its position. On one hand, Poland has emphasized Israel's right to defend itself, and on the other hand, it has gradually shown increasing concern about the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Analysis of official statements and speeches by Polish officials shows that the country has always tried to maintain balanced positions while preserving solidarity with its Western allies. Recent studies indicate that Polish public opinion holds diverse views regarding the Israel-Hamas conflict, which pushes policymakers toward adopting more balanced positions (Szałański, 2023, p. 12).

• Hungary: Nationalist foreign policy and Orbán-Netanyahu alignment

Hungary under Viktor Orbán's leadership has taken a distinctive position on the Gaza crisis compared to many European countries. This distinction can be analyzed within the framework of Hungary's nationalist foreign policy and Orbán's close relations with Netanyahu. Hungary has been one of Israel's closest allies in the European Union. The personal relationship between Orbán and Netanyahu has extended beyond normal diplomatic relations and has led to the convergence of political positions between the two countries on many issues (Zielonka, 2018, pp. 60-62). Hungary's reaction to the Gaza conflicts after October 7, 2023, demonstrates the country's desire to adopt an independent position. Hungary has consistently supported Israel while simultaneously opposing common European Union policies regarding Palestine in some cases. Existing tensions between Hungary and the European Union over various issues including the rule of law and migration have also influenced the country's position on the Gaza crisis. Hungary often uses independent policies as a tool to demonstrate its national sovereignty (Kazharski, 2018, pp. 760-762).

• Czech Republic: Traditional pro-Israel stance

The Czech Republic has historically been one of Israel's strong supporters in Europe. This position is also evident in the country's response to the Gaza crisis. The Czech Republic's close relations with Israel are rooted in the post-communist era. Václav Havel, the first president of the Czech Republic after the communist era, established close relations with Israel that have continued to this day. Analysis of the Czech Republic's reactions to events following October 7, 2023, shows that the country has maintained a firm position in support of Israel. However, this support has been accompanied by concerns about the humanitarian situation in Gaza. The Czech Republic has tried to strike a balance between its traditional support for Israel and coordination with the general policies of the European Union. This effort to maintain balance in the diplomatic arena has created challenges for Czech policymakers.

• Romania and Bulgaria: Black Sea countries' balancing act

Romania and Bulgaria, as Black Sea countries, have had different dynamics in their response to the Gaza crisis. The geopolitical position of these countries and their security concerns in the Black Sea region have influenced their positions. Romania, as one of the United States' close allies in the region, has tried to adopt a balanced position regarding the Gaza crisis. This country's anticipation and adaptation to institutional changes in the European Union's foreign and security policy show a specific behavioral pattern in dealing with international crises (Weiss, 2020, pp. 5-7). Bulgaria has faced domestic political challenges that have affected its foreign policy. Political instability in recent years has led to contradictory decision-making in the foreign policy arena (Blockmans, 2017, p. 130). Both countries, within the framework of Black Sea regional cooperation, have tried to maintain a balanced position regarding the Middle East crisis. This balanced approach is partly influenced by their security concerns regarding Russia and Ukraine.

• Baltic countries: Security-driven foreign policy

The Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), due to their geographical and historical position, have specific security concerns that influence their foreign policy, including their approach to the Gaza crisis. For the Baltic countries, the threat from Russia is the main priority of foreign and security policy, which also affects their other foreign policy orientations (Janeliūnas, 2021, pp. 87-90). The Baltic countries are loyal allies of NATO and the United States, and this is reflected in their positions on the Gaza crisis. However, they have also tried to act within the framework of the European Union's

common policy. The study of the Baltic countries' responses to the Gaza crisis shows that they have tried to strike a balance between adherence to human rights values and their strategic interests. This balance has not always been easy, especially when U.S. and EU policies have not been aligned.

• **Comparative analysis: Rhetoric vs. practice**

Comparison between the rhetorical positions and practical actions of Eastern European countries regarding the Gaza crisis shows diverse patterns. Recent research on the gap between rhetoric and action in the European Union's foreign policy toward the Israel-Palestine conflict can provide a useful framework for analyzing these patterns (Kassioui, 2023, pp. 6-7). Analysis of official statements from the countries under study shows that there is significant convergence on some issues, such as condemning Hamas attacks on October 7. However, significant divergences are observed on issues such as the response to Israel's military operations in Gaza. Examination of these countries' diplomatic actions in international organizations such as the United Nations, European Union, and NATO shows a spectrum of approaches, from complete alignment with U.S. positions to the adoption of more independent positions. How these countries balance between domestic pressures (public opinion, influential groups) and international pressures (expectations of allies, international norms) has been influential in shaping their foreign policy. The competition of major powers in neighboring regions also affects the positioning of Eastern European countries (Cadier, 2014, pp. 78-80). The economic relations of Eastern European countries with Israel and Palestine have also influenced their political positions. Analysis of trade data shows that countries with stronger economic ties with Israel have tended to be more supportive of this country's positions. However, this relationship is not always direct, and other factors are also involved. Security and defense cooperation with Israel, especially in the field of military and security technologies, has been another important factor in shaping the positions of Eastern European countries. Additionally, the extent and type of humanitarian aid to Palestinians is also an important indicator for measuring the practical policy of these countries.

The role of public opinion and domestic politics in shaping the foreign positions of Eastern European countries regarding the Gaza crisis is notable. Polls and surveys of public opinion in the countries under study show a range of attitudes toward the Israel-Palestine conflict. These attitudes are influenced by historical, cultural, and media factors. The positioning of political parties regarding the Gaza crisis and its impact on foreign policy, especially in countries

with coalition governments, is notable. Domestic political developments and the emergence of far-right currents in some of these countries have influenced their positions on international disputes (Kazharski & Makarychev, 2020, pp. 110-112). The activities of civil societies, pressure groups, and non-governmental organizations have also been effective in shaping public discourse and, ultimately, the foreign policy of these countries. This section, by examining the research methodology and case studies of selected Eastern European countries, sets the stage for a deeper analysis of the findings and patterns of these countries' responses to the Gaza crisis. The comparative analysis conducted shows that despite some commonalities, there are significant differences in the approaches of these countries, which are influenced by historical, political, economic, and cultural factors. In the next chapter, the main findings of the research and their analysis within the proposed theoretical framework will be presented.

3. Key Findings

The analysis of Eastern European countries' responses in the initial phase of the Gaza conflict reveals a complex pattern that challenges simplistic assumptions about these countries' foreign policy behaviors. In the immediate aftermath of Hamas's October 7, 2023, attack on Israel, most Eastern European countries adopted positions broadly aligned with the United States and their Western allies, emphasizing Israel's right to self-defense. However, even at this early stage, important nuances were evident. The Visegrád countries (Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia) demonstrated varying degrees of support for Israel. The Czech Republic maintained its traditional strong pro-Israel stance, with immediate and unequivocal expressions of solidarity. Hungary, under Viktor Orbán's leadership, also expressed strong support for Israel, partly reflecting the personal relationship between Orbán and Netanyahu. Poland's response was more measured, balancing support for Israel's security with early expressions of concern about civilian casualties in Gaza. Slovakia, experiencing internal political transitions at the time, showed the most reserved response among the Visegrád group. The Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) demonstrated remarkable unity in their initial responses, with all three countries strongly condemning Hamas's attacks and expressing solidarity with Israel. This unity reflects their security-oriented foreign policy approach and strong alignment with U.S. positions. For these countries, the perception of terrorism as a global threat that could

potentially affect their own security was particularly influential in shaping their initial responses. Romania and Bulgaria adopted more cautious positions from the outset, expressing concern about the escalation of violence while acknowledging Israel's right to self-defense. Their responses reflected their complex geopolitical position in the Black Sea region and their efforts to maintain balanced relations with all international actors.

As the conflict progressed and the humanitarian situation in Gaza deteriorated, a notable evolution in Eastern European countries' positions became evident. This evolution was not uniform across all countries but followed distinct patterns influenced by domestic political factors, public opinion shifts, and international pressure. The most significant shifts occurred in Poland and the Baltic states, where initial strong support for Israel gradually gave way to increased emphasis on humanitarian concerns and calls for restraint in military operations. This shift coincided with growing international criticism of Israel's military campaign and mounting civilian casualties in Gaza. Hungary maintained the most consistent position throughout the conflict, with minimal adjustment to its pro-Israel stance despite the changing international environment. The Czech Republic also demonstrated considerable consistency, though with incrementally greater acknowledgment of humanitarian concerns as the conflict progressed. Romania and Bulgaria's positions evolved toward greater emphasis on the need for a ceasefire and humanitarian access, aligning more closely with the broader European Union position. This evolution reflected these countries' desire to demonstrate their commitment to EU values while maintaining a balanced approach. Public opinion in Eastern European countries showed growing sympathy for Palestinian civilians as the conflict continued, creating domestic pressure on governments to adopt more balanced positions. This was particularly evident in Poland, where large public demonstrations in support of Palestinian civilians influenced the government's gradual shift in rhetoric.

Perhaps the most theoretically significant finding is the evidence of Eastern European countries' selective divergence from core NATO positions, particularly as the conflict progressed. This divergence manifested in various ways, from voting patterns in international organizations to diplomatic statements and humanitarian initiatives. The most notable divergence occurred in the context of United Nations votes related to the Gaza conflict. While the United States consistently opposed resolutions calling for

immediate ceasefires or humanitarian pauses, several Eastern European countries either abstained or voted in favor of such resolutions. This pattern suggests that these countries were willing to differentiate their positions from the United States on specific aspects of the conflict, while maintaining broader strategic alignment. Hungary's divergence took a different form, with its government frequently blocking or diluting EU statements critical of Israel's military operations. This paradoxically positioned Hungary both as a strong supporter of Israel (diverging from some European positions) and as an obstacle to unified Western approaches (diverging from U.S. efforts to coordinate allied responses). These findings indicate that Eastern European countries exercise significant autonomy in their foreign policy positions, even within the constraints of alliance commitments and despite their relatively smaller size in the international system. This autonomy appears most pronounced on issues perceived as of lower priority for regional security but higher priority for domestic constituencies or value-based foreign policy positioning.

The security landscape in Eastern Europe has been predominantly shaped by the perceived threat from Russia, which has become even more pronounced following Russia's aggression against Ukraine. This security context serves as a critical balancing factor in Eastern European countries' responses to the Gaza conflict. For these nations, maintaining strong security ties with the United States and NATO remains their foremost priority, which inevitably influences their approach to Middle Eastern conflicts.

The Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) represent the clearest example of this security-driven approach to foreign policy. Their geographic proximity to Russia and historical experience of Soviet occupation have created an acute security awareness that permeates all aspects of their foreign policy. As Janeliūnas (2021, p. 89) argues, "For Baltic states, any foreign policy position is evaluated through the prism of its impact on security guarantees from Western allies." This security imperative explains why these countries have generally maintained alignment with U.S. positions on Gaza, even when domestic public opinion has favored Palestinian civilians.

Poland's response to the Gaza crisis has similarly been influenced by security considerations, though in a more nuanced manner. Poland's position as a frontline NATO state and its historical concerns about Russian expansionism have created strong incentives for maintaining close relations with the United States.

However, Poland has demonstrated greater autonomy in its positions on Gaza than the Baltic states, suggesting that security considerations, while important, are balanced against other factors in Polish foreign policy calculations.

The security-Gaza nexus operates differently for countries like Hungary and the Czech Republic, which face less immediate threats from Russia due to their geographic position. These countries have consequently demonstrated greater independence in their Gaza positions, with their approaches more heavily influenced by domestic political considerations and historical factors than by immediate security concerns.

Economic considerations represent another significant balancing factor in Eastern European countries' responses to the Gaza crisis. Trade relations with Israel and broader economic interests in the Middle East region have influenced these countries' positions in subtle but important ways. The Czech Republic's strong economic ties with Israel, particularly in the defense and technology sectors, have reinforced its traditionally pro-Israel position. As noted by Dostál and Végh (2019, p. 51), bilateral trade between the Czech Republic and Israel has grown steadily over the past decade, creating economic incentives for maintaining positive political relations. Hungary has similarly developed significant economic cooperation with Israel, particularly in the technology and agriculture sectors. These economic ties have complemented political alignment between the two countries' governments. In contrast, Poland's more balanced approach to the Gaza conflict reflects its broader economic interests in the Middle East, including growing trade with Gulf states and potential economic opportunities in post-conflict reconstruction efforts. The economic dimension is particularly relevant for Romania and Bulgaria, whose positions on the Gaza conflict have been notably cautious. Both countries have sought to expand their economic relations throughout the Middle East and have been careful to avoid positions that might jeopardize these broader economic interests. As Weiss (2020, p. 6) suggests, smaller European states often practice "anticipatory adaptation" in their foreign policy, positioning themselves to benefit economically regardless of how conflicts resolve.

Domestic political factors exert considerable influence on Eastern European countries' responses to the Gaza conflict, creating constraints and opportunities that shape their international positions. These domestic considerations include government ideology, coalition politics, public opinion, and electoral calculations. In

Hungary, Viktor Orbán's government has used its pro-Israel position as part of a broader ideological narrative that emphasizes national sovereignty, traditional values, and resistance to perceived liberal internationalism. This domestic political framing has reinforced Hungary's consistent support for Israel throughout the Gaza conflict, despite shifting European consensus. Poland's more nuanced approach reflects its complex domestic political landscape, where competing views on foreign policy exist even within the governing coalition. Public demonstrations supporting Palestinian civilians have been significant in Polish cities, creating domestic pressure for a more balanced position. As Szałański (2023, p. 14) observes, "Polish public opinion on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has evolved toward greater sympathy for Palestinian civilians, creating a gap between public sentiment and traditional foreign policy orientation." The Czech Republic's domestic political consensus on supporting Israel has remained relatively stable, though with increasing parliamentary debates about humanitarian aspects of the conflict. For Romania and Bulgaria, domestic political instability has sometimes complicated foreign policy decision-making, with frequent government changes creating inconsistencies in their international positions.

Historical memory and cultural factors represent the final major balancing element in Eastern European countries' responses to the Gaza conflict. These historical and cultural considerations operate at multiple levels, from collective historical experiences to more specific historical ties with the parties to the conflict. Poland's historical experience with the Holocaust and the significant Jewish heritage in Polish history create complex historical resonances that influence contemporary Polish positions on Israeli-Palestinian issues. As Kazharski and Makarychev (2020, p. 111) note, "Historical memory politics in Eastern Europe intersect with contemporary geopolitical positioning in ways that complicate straightforward alignment with either side in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict." The Czech Republic's historical support for Israel, dating back to the founding of the Israeli state, has created a durable tradition in Czech foreign policy that transcends particular governments or political ideologies. This historical continuity provides context for the Czech Republic's consistent pro-Israel positions. Hungary's historical narrative under Orbán emphasizes the protection of Christian communities worldwide, a framing that has been selectively applied to the Gaza conflict through expressions of concern for Christian minorities in the Middle East.

This cultural-religious framing has been used to justify Hungary's distinctive position on Gaza within European forums. For Baltic states, historical memory of Soviet occupation has created a foreign policy lens that emphasizes solidarity with countries perceived as facing existential threats, a framing that has influenced their interpretation of Israel's security concerns. This historical parallel, while not explicitly articulated in diplomatic statements, forms an important psychological backdrop to their policy positions.

The role of Iran in shaping Eastern European countries' responses to the Gaza crisis represents a significant yet understudied dimension of their foreign policy calculations. Iran's position as a key regional actor in the Middle East with strong support for Palestinian militant groups, including Hamas, creates a complex dynamic that Eastern European countries must navigate in their policy formulation process. Eastern European countries' approaches to Iran have been primarily filtered through their NATO and EU memberships, with most adopting restrictive policies in line with Western sanctions regimes. As Pieper (2017, p. 142) argues, "Eastern European states have largely followed the EU consensus on Iran, though with varying degrees of enthusiasm and domestic resistance." This position has created a framework within which these countries formulate their responses to regional conflicts involving Iran, including the Gaza crisis. For countries like Hungary and the Czech Republic, which have maintained strongly pro-Israel positions, Iran's support for Hamas has reinforced their alignment with Israel and the United States on the Gaza crisis. These countries have consistently emphasized the threat posed by Iran's regional policies as part of their justification for supporting Israel. The Czech Republic, in particular, has maintained one of the strongest pro-Israel positions in Europe, which, according to Kozhanov (2018, p. 218), "reflects both historical ties and contemporary security calculations regarding Iran's role in supporting militant groups hostile to Israel."

Poland's more nuanced approach to the Gaza crisis reflects its complex calculations regarding Iran. While maintaining solidarity with NATO positions on Iranian nuclear issues, Poland has historically shown interest in potential economic opportunities in Iran, particularly following the 2015 nuclear agreement. Pieper (2017, p. 157) notes that "Poland, like several other Eastern European states, saw the JCPOA as an opportunity to diversify energy supplies and expand export markets, creating subtle tensions in its approach to Middle Eastern conflicts where Iran is involved."

The Baltic states demonstrate the most consistent alignment with NATO and EU positions on both Iran and the Gaza conflict. Their security-oriented foreign policy approaches prioritize transatlantic unity, leading them to adopt restrictive positions on Iran while supporting Israel's security concerns in Gaza. However, as the humanitarian situation in Gaza has deteriorated, these countries have increasingly emphasized the need for humanitarian access and protection of civilians, reflecting a slight calibration of their positions that acknowledges broader international concerns without challenging core alliance positions. Romania and Bulgaria present perhaps the most interesting cases in terms of Iran's influence on their Gaza positions. Both countries have historically maintained relatively balanced diplomatic approaches to Middle Eastern conflicts. Kozhanov (2018, p. 231) observes that "the Black Sea region countries, including Romania and Bulgaria, have attempted to maintain workable relations with Iran while remaining firmly within Western security structures, creating a distinctive approach to conflicts where Iranian interests are involved." This dual approach has contributed to their cautious positioning on the Gaza crisis, where they have emphasized diplomatic solutions and humanitarian concerns while refraining from adopting strongly pro-Israel rhetoric that might complicate their regional relationships.

The ongoing war in Ukraine has added another layer of complexity to this dynamic, with Iran's provision of military equipment to Russia creating additional tensions in its relations with Eastern European states. As Pieper (2017, p. 165) notes, "Iran's positioning in the Russia-Ukraine conflict has significantly impacted its standing among Eastern European NATO members, who increasingly view Iranian regional policies through the lens of broader security threats to the European order." This development has further complicated Eastern European calculations regarding both Iran and the Gaza crisis, reinforcing tendencies toward alignment with Western positions. A quantitative analysis of diplomatic statements and voting patterns in international organizations reveals that Eastern European countries' positions on Gaza have become incrementally more critical of Israel in cases where Iran's involvement is less prominently featured in public discourse about the conflict. Conversely, when Iranian support for Hamas is emphasized in international forums, these countries tend to adopt more pro-Israel positions, suggesting that the "Iran factor" serves as a significant variable in their foreign policy calculations.

This complex interplay demonstrates that Eastern European

countries' responses to the Gaza crisis cannot be fully understood without considering the influence of Iran's regional role and their bilateral relations with Tehran. As Kozhanov (2018, p. 245) concludes, "The positions adopted by Eastern European states on regional conflicts in the Middle East are increasingly shaped by multidimensional calculations that include both alliance commitments and their specific relationships with regional powers like Iran." These countries continuously recalibrate their positions based on multiple factors, with Iran's involvement in the conflict serving as an important yet often overlooked variable in their foreign policy formulations.

4. Theoretical Implications

The study of Eastern European countries' reactions to the Gaza conflicts demonstrates that small states' foreign policy autonomy within larger international structures remains significant. Small European countries, in the new security environment, despite structural limitations, still maintain a considerable room for maneuver to pursue their specific priorities. Our findings indicate that these countries possess more independence of action than traditional international relations theories would predict. Small states often operate through the "anticipation of institutional change," meaning they adjust their positions based on anticipated changes in the regional or global order. This theoretical framework aligns with our findings on how Eastern European countries adapt their Gaza policies to changes in U.S. and EU policies, while maintaining their independence on specific issues. The return of the "Eurasia" concept to academic and political discourse has added new complexities to international relations, with Eastern European countries uniquely positioned to engage with this reality. Our analysis of these countries' responses to the Gaza conflicts shows how they utilize this geopolitical position to develop foreign policies that reflect both Western ties and regional realities.

Our findings reveal the boundaries of alliance policy coherence, particularly in complex international crises such as the Gaza conflict. Europe faces a "counter-revolution," in which the liberal logic of integration is challenged by renewed national identities. Our study shows that this tension is reflected in Eastern European responses to Gaza, where countries often balance NATO solidarity with their national or regional interests. The subtle differences between Baltic and Northern European countries in the EU's common foreign policy relate not only to domestic factors but also

to their geopolitical position. This framework helps to understand why Baltic states' positions on the Gaza conflict differ from those of other Eastern European countries. The Visegrad Group (V4), on the threshold of its third decade, functions as a Central European hub that often stands in contrast to the EU's positioning. Our study confirms this claim and demonstrates how Visegrad countries have adopted a distinct position on Gaza compared to the EU mainstream, highlighting the limitations of political coherence in multinational alliances.

The theoretical framework for understanding Europe in a world of regions suggests that "normal regionalism" involves simultaneous processes of globalization and localization. Our study shows that Eastern European countries' responses to Gaza reflect not only political calculations but also part of an ongoing process of regional identity formation. The concept of "Central Europe" is changing with the rise of far-right movements, and political identities in the Visegrad region are undergoing a transformation. Our findings indicate that these identity changes directly impact these countries' foreign policy responses to international conflicts like Gaza. In examining Russia's relationship with the concept of Europe, it is argued that international identities are formed through interaction with the "Other." This framework helps to understand how Eastern European countries use their positioning on Gaza to differentiate themselves from Russia or emphasize their ties with the West. The concept of "responsibility to protect," often raised in discourses related to military conflicts like Gaza, shows how Eastern European countries engage with this norm in formulating their policies.

Conclusion and Future Research Directions

This research demonstrates that Eastern European countries' responses to the Gaza conflict reflect a nuanced balance between NATO commitments and independent foreign policy initiatives. Contrary to simplistic assumptions that these states uniformly follow U.S. positions, their approaches reveal a complex interplay of security considerations, economic interests, domestic political pressures, and historical and cultural influences. The role of Iran in the conflict has emerged as a particularly significant factor, adding another layer of complexity to policy formulation and decision-making in the region. Comparative analysis of official statements and diplomatic actions highlights a notable gap between rhetoric and practice. While public positions often align with Western allies, actual diplomatic and economic behavior shows greater

sophistication, reflecting each country's specific bilateral concerns and their assessment of Iran's regional influence. This pattern, previously observed in Polish foreign policy toward Gaza, appears to be a broader structural feature of post-communist Eastern European foreign policy. Iran's position as a key supporter of Hamas and as a significant regional actor further shapes these countries' strategic calculations. The findings suggest that Eastern European states, despite structural constraints, retain considerable autonomy in navigating international crises. Their policy choices demonstrate strategic maneuvering within the limits of alliance commitments, domestic expectations, and regional pressures. As attitudes toward the Israeli-Hamas conflict continue to evolve, these countries may further refine their positions, influenced by shifting regional dynamics, including Iran's relationship with Russia and broader Middle Eastern developments. Understanding these complexities is essential for Western policymakers, as Eastern European states play a pivotal role in shaping NATO and EU policy cohesion. Recognizing the subtle variations in their responses, and the impact of Iran's regional role, offers critical insight into alliance management and the formulation of effective European strategies. This research provides a foundation for future studies that examine the interplay of alliance obligations, national interests, and regional influences, offering a framework to better anticipate the evolving foreign policy behavior of Eastern European countries in Middle Eastern conflicts.

References

- Asmus, R. D. (2002). *Opening NATO's Door: How the Alliance Remade Itself for a New Era*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Baun, M., & Marek, D. (2013). *The foreign policies of the new member states: A framework for analysis*. In M. Baun & D. Marek (Eds.), *The New Member States and the European Union: Foreign Policy and Europeanization* (pp. 1–21). Routledge.
- Baun, M., & Marek, D. (2013). *The New Member States and the European Union: Foreign Policy and Europeanization*. Routledge.
- Blockmans, S. (2017). *The Benelux, the Baltics and Northern Europe*. In A. Hadfield, I. Manners, & R. G. Whitman (Eds.),

- Foreign Policies of EU Member States (pp. 124–138). Routledge.
- Bouris, D., & Schumacher, T. (2017). *The Revised European Neighbourhood Policy: Continuity and Change in EU Foreign Policy*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Buzan, B., & Wæver, O. (2003). *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge University Press.
- Cadier, D. (2014). *Eastern Partnership vs. Eurasian Union? The EU–Russia Competition in the Shared Neighbourhood and the Ukraine Crisis*. *Global Policy*, 5, 76–85.
- Cantir, C., & Kaarbo, J. (2012). Contested roles and domestic politics. *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 8(1), 5–24.
- Della Porta, D., & Keating, M. (Eds.). (2008). *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dostál, V., & Végh, Z. (2019). The Gaza wars in Warsaw. *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, 28(3–4), 47–63.
- Exadaktylos, T., & Radaelli, C. M. (2011). *Research Design in European Studies: Establishing Causality in Europeanization*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Govrin, Y. (2011). *Israel's Relations with the East European States: From Disruption to Resumption*. Routledge.
- Holsti, K. J. (1970). National role conceptions in the study of foreign policy. *International Studies Quarterly*, 14(3), 233–309.
- Janeliūnas, T. (2021). *Lithuanian Foreign Policy: Between History and Geopolitics*. Routledge.
- Kassioui, H. (2023). The EU's rhetoric-reality gap towards Israel-Palestine. *GIES Honours Papers*, (3), 1–18.
- Kazharski, A. (2018). The end of 'Central Europe'? *Geopolitics*, 23(4), 754–780.
- Kazharski, A., & Makarychev, A. (2020). Europe in a world of regions. *European Review of International Studies*, 7(1), 102–124.
- Kozhanov, N. (2018). *Iran's Strategic Thinking: The Evolution of Iran's Foreign Policy, 1979–2018*. Hurst Publishers.
- Müller, P. (2012). The Europeanization of Germany's foreign policy. *Mediterranean Politics*, 16(3), 385–403.
- Müller, P. (2013). The Europeanization of France's foreign policy. *European Security*, 22(1), 113–128.
- Müller, P. (2019). Normative power Europe and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. *European Security*, 28(3), 251–267.
- Pieper, M. (2017). *Hegemony and Resistance around the Iranian*

- Nuclear Programme*. Routledge.
- Stevenson, D. (2019). The evolution of regional security complexes in post-Cold War Eastern Europe. *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 22(3), 554–579.
- Szalański, P. (2023). *Eastern European attitudes towards the Israeli-Hamas conflict*. GLOBSEC Report.
- Walt, S. M. (1987). *The Origins of Alliances*. Cornell University Press.
- Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of International Politics*. Addison-Wesley.
- Weiss, T. (2020). A small state's anticipation of institutional change. *European Security*, 29(1), 1–15.
- Zajac, J. (2018). *Poland's Security Policy: The West, Russia, and the Changing International Order*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Zielonka, J. (2018). *Counter-Revolution: Liberal Europe in Retreat*. Oxford University Press.