

— SPECIAL SECTION ONE —

The Origins, Development, and Characteristics of Central and Eastern European Diasporas

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The article examines the question of what shapes the process of creating diasporas in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). It argues that a comprehensive understanding of the origins, development, and contemporary characteristics of CEE diasporas requires consideration of the region's distinctive historical experience, characterised by a history of multiethnic empires, border changes, wars, authoritarian regimes, and recurrent waves of both forced and voluntary migration. Drawing on the conceptual framework proposed by Rogers Brubaker, it highlights the internal diversity of CEE diasporas. The distinction between classic emigrant diasporas and 'accidental' diasporas, which are formed as a result of border changes rather than physical migration, serves to emphasise the significance of kin-minorities residing in neighbouring states in conjunction with emigrant communities situated abroad. The article identifies four critical historical moments – the collapse of multiethnic empires, post-World War I and II border changes, the communist period and the Iron Curtain, and post-2004 European integration – as key determinants shaping the specificity of Central and Eastern European diasporas.

Keywords: diaspora, Central and Eastern Europe, kin-minorities, diaspora policy

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Introduction

Can we identify a specific understanding of diasporas and particular policies toward diasporas in the case of Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries?¹ What shared historical experiences demonstrate the existence of common features in the process of creating diasporas in this region, in their perception by countries of origin, and consequently, in the relations between diasporas and countries of origin?

Undoubtedly, the phenomenon of diasporas in Central and Eastern Europe originates in the unique history of the region. Understanding the shared historical experiences of the CEE region is essential to comprehend not only the origins of its diasporas but also the relationships within the triad formed by diasporas, countries of origin, and countries of residence (Brubaker 1996). Shared experiences of partitions, territorial conflicts, global wars, shifting borders, authoritarian regimes, forced resettlements, and successive waves of economic and political emigration shaped the history of individual CEE countries and the region as a whole. The two world wars had a profound impact on the population structure of the entire European continent, resulting in widespread destruction and post-war border changes. Millions of people had to relocate due to fighting on the front lines and the new political order that followed. After the First World War, the Treaty of Versailles and the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire placed millions of people in new nation-states, while others emigrated voluntarily in search of better living conditions. Similar processes of forced and voluntary emigration on a mass scale occurred after the Second World War and the establishment of the new post-Yalta political order.

The history of Central and Eastern Europe constitutes the history of successive waves of population movements within and outside the continent. These shared historical experiences left a strong mark on the perception of community and national identity. Although many countries in the region underwent successful democratic transformations in the 1990s and integrated into European structures (NATO, EU), historical trauma and geopolitical tensions continue to influence the contemporary politics of these countries, where diasporas play a significant role.

A common and simultaneously distinctive feature of Central European diasporas is their internal diversity. Rogers Brubaker (1996, 2001) aptly conceptualises this phenomenon by distinguishing classic emigrant diasporas, which arise from the decision to leave one's state of origin and settle in other countries for political and economic reasons, and accidental diasporas, remained outside their home country for reasons beyond their control, rather than as a result of conscious emigration.

This distinction forms the basis for understanding the phenomenon that not only emigrants – and their descendants – create diasporas in this region but also kin-minorities who live primarily in neighbouring countries. The representatives of the latter group did not experience emigration; they did not leave their homeland, but their history involves an equally, and perhaps even more, challenging experience of involuntarily existing outside their country because of border shifts after subsequent wars. In the literature on diasporas from Central and Eastern Europe, two terms denote the state from which they originate: kin-state and state of origin (Brubaker 1996; Walker 1994). The difference between them is subtle, yet important. The first term usually refers to the state's relations with ethnic and cultural minorities based on ethnocultural affinity. In contrast, the latter term emphasises relations based on legal nationality/citizenship or sovereign jurisdiction and refers primarily to the emigrant diaspora. This text employs the term state of origin as a broader term encompassing both types of diasporas: kin-minorities and emigrants.

This article outlines a thesis about four crucial moments in the history of the region that determined the emergence, development, and specificity of the diasporic communities from Central and Eastern Europe. These moments include: 1) the existence and subsequent collapse of multiethnic empires – the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires, 2) changes in national borders following the two world wars, 3) the experience of communism and isolation, embodied by the Iron Curtain, and 4) European integration and the accession of the region's countries to EU structures.

The existence and fall of multiethnic empires

At the end of the nineteenth century, the Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires together covered more than 60 per cent of the European continent and encompassed a significant share of its population. Both empires governed multinational, multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual populations. Although German, Austrian, and Hungarian communities dominated the Habsburg Empire, it also included substantial populations of e.g. Slovenes, Croats, Serbs, Romanians, Czechs, Slovaks, Poles, and Jews. The Russian Empire was a similar mosaic that, in addition to Russians, included Ukrainians, Belarusians, Poles, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, Finns, Tatars, Georgians, Armenians, Jews, and other groups. Moreover, the long history of both empires shares a history of population movements and the formation of diasporic communities across the world, originating in Central and Eastern Europe. This history reveals that social, economic, and political factors consistently drive common patterns of mass mobility. During this period, major emigration routes from Central and Eastern Europe to Western Europe and across the Atlantic emerged and persisted throughout the following century.

Population movements became widespread in the nineteenth century and stemmed from common sources, such as overpopulation, poverty, lack of prospects, and political repressions (Moch 1992; Walaszek 2007). To illustrate, beginning in the 1880s, Galicia witnessed the Great Emigration, a mass migration of landless peasants driven by economic hardship, pervasive rural poverty, and landlessness. Initially, this migration followed a seasonal pattern, with migrants traveling to Germany, France, and other countries undergoing the Industrial Revolution to find work. Later, the migration expanded to transatlantic destinations, primarily the United States and, to a lesser extent, Canada, Brazil, and Argentina. Transoceanic emigration routes to the Americas developed at the turn of the twentieth century and remained active until the end of the last century (Slany 1995).

Ralph Merville (1990) estimates that by 1914, approximately 10 million people had emigrated from the two empires, primarily to the United States of America. Analysing in greater detail the emigration routes of various national groups from the Russian Empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Merville demonstrates that the growing mobility of minority groups, especially Jews, Poles, and Lithuanians, played a significant role. Moreover, alongside economic reasons, external factors influenced this movement: the development of railway networks connecting Central and Eastern Europe with German ports, from which ships departed for America, falling travel costs, and the tsarist authorities' decision to loosen certain restrictions. Furthermore, Merville emphasises the diverse nature of emigration, which did not always remain permanent, as some departures had a more seasonal and short-term character that influenced relations with the community of origin. Permanent emigration, often characteristic of the Jewish population, usually severed or weakened contacts entirely. In contrast, temporary emigrants maintained strong ties with their home communities through remittances, cultural connections, and visits. This topic is one of the main themes that William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki explore in their classic five-volume work *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, first published between 1918 and 1920. In this work, the authors demonstrate how, through the exchange

of information, letters, and remittances, emigrants shaped both the places they left and the places where they settled.

As the twentieth century began, a significant influx of overseas emigration was observed, for the first time in European history, migration to America became a mass phenomenon. Similar processes affected Jews from Central and Eastern Europe, with many of them leaving Galicia and the western part of the Russian Empire due to persecution, poverty, and lack of prospects. Isaac Bashevis Singer, born near Warsaw in the early twentieth century, addressed these urgent concerns in his novels. The Jews settled on the eastern coast of the United States, establishing numerous, rapidly developing communities with strong, distinct cultural and social structures. Other national and ethnic groups from Central and Eastern Europe behaved similarly, creating enclaves in their new places of residence, where they maintained their own traditions, culture, and language. These groups' integration into their new environment proceeded at a slow pace (Jaroszyńska-Kirchmann 2004; Morawska 1984; Pula 1995; Szlauzys 2017). To this day, many American cities still have neighbourhoods that people traditionally refer to as Slavic villages, even though their former inhabitants left long ago.

Border changes after the two world wars

The First World War triggered the collapse of the great multinational empires of Austria-Hungary and Russia, which had previously dominated Central and Eastern Europe. The Treaty of Versailles (1919) formally ratified this disintegration and marked the symbolic beginning of a new geopolitical order across the entire continent. Within its territory, independent states emerged based on the principle of national self-determination. These states included Austria and Hungary as independent republics, Czechoslovakia, which united Czechs, Slovaks, and numerous German and Hungarian minorities in the west and south of the country, Poland, which regained independence after 123 years of partitions, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia), and Romania, with a large Hungarian minority.

Moreover, the new territorial divisions and state borders that authorities established at the turn of 1918 and 1919 led to mass ethnic migration and resettlement. The newly established states faced the need to build relations with co-ethnics and emigrants living abroad, as well as to develop principles, tools, and institutions to maintain national identity and contact with their homeland. Many countries in the region viewed the presence of numerous and territorially concentrated minorities as an instrument of political influence in relations with their neighbours. In his article published in this issue, Miha Zobec (2025, in this section) describes the complex process of shaping the newly established state's policy towards diasporas in the interwar period, drawing on the example of Yugoslavia. Zobec analyses the diverse actions that the Yugoslav authorities took towards various diaspora groups: emigrants, trans-border co-ethnics, as well as those who decided to move and settle down in the newly formed state within the framework of the Yugoslav nation-building project.

George Curzon, the British diplomat who had never visited this part of Europe, drew widespread criticism when he established new borders at Versailles. Many considered these borders unjust, as significant national and ethnic groups found themselves outside the borders of their own countries, which fuelled political instability across the region. Under the Treaty of Trianon (1920), Hungary experienced the greatest territorial losses (70 percent of its territory) and consequently a sharp population decline in favour of its neighbouring states. A few million ethnic Hungarians suddenly lived outside the borders of the new state, primarily in Romania (mainly Transylvania), Czechoslovakia (southern Slovakia and Transcarpathia), and Yugoslavia (Vojvodina). The regional concentration of

these groups would prove significant in the future, as the issue of Hungarian minorities and their discrimination would become the source of interstate tensions and revisionist aspirations. Many still consider the decisions made in Trianon unjust and humiliating, shaping Budapest's domestic and foreign policies to this day (Egry 2020; Gyáni 2012).

The Second World War triggered even greater political, territorial, and population changes. The war culminated in the Yalta and Potsdam Conferences, during which the winners drew new borders and forced mass resettlements that affected virtually every country in the region. Forced population resettlements resulting from political decisions by foreign powers form one of the most tragic experiences of Central and Eastern Europe (Snyder 2010). Deportations and displacement continued long after the end of the war in 1945 and affected millions of Germans, Poles, Hungarians, and other national groups. Until the early 1950s, the USSR deported people from territories within the new borders of the USSR into very remote areas, including Siberia and Kazakhstan. These deportations affected Poles, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, Ukrainians, Germans, and Tatars. The history of forced displacements left deep wounds in the memory of Central and Eastern European nations and continues to shape their national identities.

Poland is an example of a country that experienced significant territorial changes due to the decisions originating in Yalta. The country's border shifted westward through the USSR's annexation of eastern Poland – now part of Belarus, Ukraine, and Lithuania – and the incorporation of parts of eastern Germany into Poland as compensation for the lost lands. These border shifts induced the mass resettlement of millions of people and the emergence of numerous communities and territorially concentrated Polish minorities – accidental diasporas, using Brubaker's term – in neighbouring countries: Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine. Officially referred to as Poles in the East, they remain an important goal of diasporic policies pursued by successive Polish governments to this day (Nowosielski and Nowak 2017).

As Brubaker (2009) aptly notes, the emergence of accidental diasporas resulting from border changes after the First and Second World Wars represents a unique phenomenon in Central and Eastern Europe. Their significance in the histories of many countries proves crucial for understanding both the emergence of Central European diasporas and contemporary interstate relations in the region.

Experiencing communism and isolation

After the Second World War, most Central and Eastern European countries fell under the political and economic influence of the USSR. Communist regimes emerged in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria. Citizens of these countries experienced communist party rule, centrally planned economies, political repressions, and ubiquitous surveillance. The term 'Iron Curtain' perfectly captured the situation in Central and Eastern Europe in the postwar period. After communist governments subordinated to Moscow seized power, authorities introduced strict regulations on travel abroad and enforced restrictive passport rules, effectively preventing emigration to Western Europe and overseas (Stola 2010).

In the following postwar decades, state authorities gradually lifted these restrictions, striving to control migration flows by initiating seasonal or contractual labour migration, often to other socialist countries and, less frequently, to Western nations such as the Federal Republic of Germany, Austria, or France, based on bilateral international agreements. Furthermore, this period witnessed waves of involuntary emigration from the region following unsuccessful anti-government social protests and associated persecutions. The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 prompted approximately 200 thousand

people to flee the country, fearing repression. Following the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, tens of thousands of Czechs and Slovaks fled to the West, fearing reprisals after the suppression of the Prague Spring. Poland experienced a similar wave of emigration following the banning of the Solidarity trade union and the introduction of martial law in 1981.

Subsequent waves of emigration, resulting from political repression in the region, prompted opposition groups abroad into action. The establishment of communist regimes in the CEE countries prevented many wartime emigrants from returning to their home countries. These emigrants supported democratic governments in exile and built active anti-communist emigrant networks, primarily in Great Britain, France, and the United States. Democratic governments in exile from countries such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Hungary formally maintained the state structures that had gone into exile at the outbreak of the Second World War. They continued their activities, mainly in London, integrating politically active emigrants from subsequent waves, who rejected communist rule in their homelands.

We could describe the diaspora policies of communist and socialist countries as twofold. Authorities treated political emigrants as traitors and enemies, subjecting emigrant communities to surveillance by the security services. Furthermore, the authorities attempted to seize control of independent diaspora organisations in Western countries, accusing them of revolutionary and anti-government activities, while marginalising the influence of governments in exile. At the same time, communist authorities supported the migration of contract workers to neighbouring countries, approaching it as part of a cooperation policy within the Eastern Bloc.

The political transformations initiated in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 emerged as turning points leading to the overthrow of communism, the fall of the Iron Curtain, and the profound political and economic transformation of the entire region. Moreover, the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the restoration of full sovereignty to Central European countries marked the beginning of a new chapter in their relations with diasporas (King 1998). The first democratic governments needed to redefine these relations and, above all, rebuild trust after decades of hostility toward emigrant communities in Western countries. Additionally, the 1990s initiated a new phase in the region's engagement with kin-minorities, whose issues had remained frozen under communist rule. Consequently, successive governments of these countries prioritised these groups, implementing special measures for co-ethnics, such as repatriation schemes, preferential paths to citizenship or *quasi*-citizenship rights. For instance, ethnic cards in Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, and Romania confirmed membership in the national community and granted certain privileges guaranteed by the state of origin (Kovács 2017: 96–98; Waterbury 2014).

In his article, Bastian Sendhardt (2025, in this section) frames diaspora policy as an attempt to create a political community on a global scale – as global nation-building process. Sendhardt claims that diaspora engagement policies extend beyond foreign and migration policy and contends that instruments like *quasi*-citizenship (Polish diaspora policy and Pole's Card) expand national membership beyond the territorial and juridical borders of the nation-state, thereby reshaping the traditional categories such as citizenship, territory, and national belonging.

The transformation of the CEE countries towards democratic political systems and free market economies opened their borders and created new opportunities for emigration (Fassmann, Münz 1994). From the early 1990s onwards, traditional emigration routes to Western Europe and overseas reemerged after remaining closed during the Iron Curtain period. Some countries, such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary, implemented reforms relatively smoothly, while others, including Romania and Bulgaria, struggled with lasting political instability and economic difficulties. These differences shaped the varying pace at which these countries integrated into European structures. Ultimately, however, all the countries listed above became members of the European Union, marking another significant shared experience for the entire region and bringing considerable consequences for the development of Central European diasporas.

EU membership and post-accession diasporas

The opening of the European Union to new member states from Central and Eastern Europe symbolised the end of the division of Europe that had persisted since the end of the Second World War. The year 2004 witnessed the largest expansion in EU history, with 10 countries joining the Union, including 8 Central European countries: the Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Hungary. Three years later, Bulgaria and Romania followed. The EU accession granted citizens of the new member states the right to move freely within the Union, which encouraged waves of emigration to Western European countries in search of work and higher wages. The opening of labour markets in countries such as Great Britain, Ireland, and Sweden in 2004 – and, with a delay, in other EU countries as well – contributed to large-scale emigration from the region.

The accession of the CEE countries to the EU became another shared regional experience that fundamentally changed migration patterns, reducing traditional overseas routes in favour of intra-European migration. New diasporic communities emerged, which scholars describe as post-accession diasporas (Popyk, Lesińska and Dambrauskas 2023). While the scale of emigration from the new member states varied, in practice, each country experienced it to some degree. The largest number of emigrants to the ‘old’ EU countries relative to their population occurred in Romania, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, and Bulgaria (King and Okólski 2019). Emigrants from the CEE countries travelled along well-established routes to traditional destinations, such as Germany, but also settled in entirely new territories. In a short period of time, Poles became the largest national group in countries such as Iceland and Ireland, where almost no Poles had lived before Poland’s EU accession (Dziekońska 2021; Kloc-Nowak, Lesińska and Pszczółkowska 2023a).

Although post-accession emigrants remain a diverse group, several common characteristics are evident. Post-accession emigration primarily comprised young and educated individuals – secondary school and university graduates – who found their motivation in economic factors and sought opportunities for higher earnings, better living conditions, and improved educational prospects. Scholars often emphasise the transnational nature of this diaspora (Engbersen, Snel and de Boom 2012; White, Grabowska, Kaczmarczyk and Slany 2018). Post-accession emigrants maintain strong ties with their countries of origin, frequently visiting, investing, and keenly observing the situation in their home countries with the prospect of a possible return in the future. At the same time, these emigrants adapt to life in their host countries, start families there, and acquire new citizenships. Two decades after the first EU expansion that included the CEE countries, scholars can no longer describe post-accession migration as a temporary phenomenon but as a process of permanent settlement in new homelands (Kloc-Nowak, Lesińska and Pszczółkowska 2023b). Currently, post-accession diasporas exist as populations in which new generations emerge: those born in their parents’ homeland and raised abroad – the 1.5 generation – and those born abroad – the 2.0 generation.

The phenomenon of post-accession diasporas, their size, as well as their transnational and multigenerational character, poses significant challenges for countries of origin in maintaining mutual relations and building bonds. This situation demands the redefinition and intensification of existing initiatives towards diasporic communities, including the provision of consular assistance for economic emigrants and the development of infrastructure and educational programmes in the native language to engage younger generations (Popyk 2022). Furthermore, this new phenomenon requires new strategies for cooperation with the diaspora across many areas, including legal and political (Popyk and Lesińska 2023).

Conclusion

All the historical events mentioned above shaped the emigration processes and the formation of diasporas from Central and Eastern Europe, which share multiple similarities. The historical context of the region, comprising such crucial events as the collapse of multiethnic empires, shifting national borders following both world wars, the shared experience of communism and isolation, and subsequent integration into European structures, contributed to the similarities in the emigration and settlement processes among the countries of the region. All these countries act as migrant-sending states and ethnic kin-states, each with broadly dispersed emigrant diasporas resulting from two main factors: mass outflows on the one hand, and the emergence of kin-minorities (accidental diasporas) originating in border changes on the other.

Emigration from this region has always appeared diverse, with people leaving primarily for economic reasons: poverty, overpopulation, lack of prospects, and the search for 'bread and work'. Additionally, political emigration constitutes a significant part of the history of Central European diasporas. During periods of national uprisings and ethnic, political, and religious persecution, refugees (exiles) joined economic emigrants. In his description of the Polish diaspora, Adam Walaszek (2001) accurately identifies this phenomenon as the 'diaspora of victims' and the 'diaspora of labour'. Emigrants from the region followed similar routes: westward to more affluent parts of Europe, primarily Germany and France, as well as overseas, first to the United States and later to other countries in the Americas. Traditional emigration routes changed with advancing European integration, and intracontinental mobility became dominant compared to overseas travel.

Despite internal diversity, Central European diasporas share several common features. These include a centuries-old history of multinational coexistence, shifting borders, imperial traditions of the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires, and hybrid identities connected with the phenomenon of borderlands, where various ethnic groups, cultures, and languages intertwine. These diasporas also share a legacy of intense economic and political migrations, the experience of the two world wars and subsequent forced resettlements, the isolation of communism, political transformation, and mobility at the turn of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries.

Central and Eastern European countries pursue widely ranging policies towards emigrants and kin-minorities, both in scope and the range of actions implemented. An extensive body of literature describes these diaspora policies and offers comparative analyses (see Janská 2024; Kovács 2017; Trandafoiu 2023). What distinguishes many countries in the region is their effort to strengthen relations with kin-minorities living in neighbouring countries by adopting legal, political, and institutional solutions designed specifically to support this group.

The special section comprises four articles that address the relationship between diasporas and their states of origin in Central and Eastern Europe, across various countries, historical periods, and dimensions. As mentioned above, Miha Zobec (2025, in this section) explores the process of shaping diaspora policy in the newly established state of Yugoslavia in the interwar period and the complex process of incorporating diverse diasporic communities into the newly formed nation-state. Moreover, state actions towards the diaspora carried both national and political significance, as they aimed at overcoming internal divisions within the national community and restoring the state's political legitimacy. As also noted above, Bastian Sendhardt (2025, in this section) conceptualises diaspora engagement policies as constitutive practices of global nation-building, through which states seek to recalibrate the ideal-typical relationship between citizenship, territory, and national belonging. Using

the Polish case – particularly the Card of Pole (*Karta Polaka*) – as a heuristic device, he demonstrates how states extend selected rights and forms of membership to non-resident non-citizens, thereby projecting national belonging beyond territorial borders while simultaneously reaffirming the nation-state form. The analysis shows that the Card of Pole exemplifies how contemporary states employ diaspora engagement policies to reconfigure, rather than transcend, the structural logic of the global political order.

The subsequent article in this section concerns Hungary and the changes in its diaspora policy over the past two decades. Myra Waterbury (2025, in this section) claims that the Hungarian government incorporated diaspora policy into its broader governance, using it to maintain and legitimise the current system of control by expanding the scope of illiberal and undemocratic practices, which she names ‘illiberal transnationalism’. This argument indicates that countries like Hungary show preferential treatment or marginalise members of their diaspora, emphasising their loyalty to their state of origin rather than different types of diasporas, as was the case in the past. Hungary’s current system, which is much more closed, more ideological, and less transparent policy system, has a significant impact on the structure and content of diaspora policy.

In the closing article of this special section, Ivan Kozachenko (2025, in this section) examines the activities of a particular diaspora organisation and its agency in relations with its country of origin. The article concerns the Ukrainian World Congress (UWC), the leading organisation representing the Ukrainian global diaspora, which consistently redefines its strategies in response to successive critical moments in Ukraine’s history. The UWC supports Ukraine’s pro-European course and adjusts its level of engagement to the evolving geopolitical situation. According to Kozachenko, the organisation firmly opposed the pro-Russian authorities in Kyiv and consistently strengthened the Ukrainian state during the period of full-scale Russian aggression. Moreover, the organisation participated in developing and successfully lobbied for the adoption of the long-awaited law on multiple citizenship, paving the way for greater incorporation of diaspora representatives into Ukraine’s political life.

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Notes

1. The concept of Central and Eastern Europe appears ambiguous and conventional. The present text employs a comprehensive historical and cultural approach, emphasising shared historical experiences, borderlands, interpenetrations of cultures, and hybrid identities shaped by the influence of multiethnic empires, namely the Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and Ottoman Empires, as well as wars and displacements (see Snyder 2003, 2010). In the broadest sense, this approach encompasses Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, the Baltic states, Romania, Bulgaria, as well as the countries of the former Yugoslavia, Ukraine, and Moldova. This text focuses primarily on the first group of these countries.


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Conflict of interest statement

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