

Ukraine's Complicated History with Neighbours

By [M. K. Bhadrakumar](#)

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A bizarre [geopolitical thesis in the Indian media](#) last week characterised Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent 7-hour trip to Ukraine via Poland as part of an effort "to plug a missing link — Central Europe — in India's European policy." Per this thesis, PM's trip signified an Indian "push" into Central / Eastern Europe "disentangling New Delhi's engagement with the region from its relationship with Russia."

This bizarre thesis, by implication, carries the imprimatur of Modi government but External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's cerebral mind never publicly vented such a stream of consciousness. Funnily enough, coaching academies who prepare candidates for the upcoming Civil Services Examination have also jumped into the fray with tutorials on the pernicious thesis!

Since the exponent of this thesis is a well-known senior journalist, Indian press lost no time to savour the exotica that sounded out of the ordinary. Whereas, the absurdity of the thesis should have been apparent at first glance to any erudite mind.

To delve into modern European history, Central Europe and Eastern Europe are not really interchangeable as geopolitical constructs. Central Europe is more of a geographical expression, as the region is culturally very diverse — even while sharing some historical and cultural similarities — whose "strategic awakening" actually begins only with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Berlin Wall.

The region broadly refers to the swathe of Europe that was historically part of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires comprising present-day Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Lithuania and Slovenia.

But Eastern Europe has been a sub-region of the European continent even with a wide range of geopolitical, geographical, ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic connotations. It includes present-day Belarus, Russia, Ukraine, Moldova and Romania plus the Balkans, the Baltic states and the Caucasus.

Geographically speaking, the region is defined by the Ural Mountains (in Russia) in the east while the western boundary remains nebulous, without any definite edges. (Hence the "German Question" in European history.) Eastern Europe is a significant part of European culture through millennia but distinguishable by the traditions of the Slavs and Greeks who are followers of Eastern Christianity where Eastern Orthodox forms the largest body.

Of course, the Iron Curtain gave Eastern Europe an entirely new redefinition. Indeed, redefinition has been a constant feature of Eastern European countries. Thus, the rubric Warsaw Pact came to be associated with Poland, but even then, the Visegrad Group didn't fly — the politico-military alliance that Poland sought to create in 1991 with the Czech

Republic, Slovakia and Hungary as a counterweight to the Old Europeans' hegemony in the European Union. The Visegrad Group lost traction once Poland and Hungary elected national-conservative governments while the Czech Republic and Slovakia continued as liberal democracies.

The paradox is, when the Visegrad alliance finally split, it was over the four countries' divergent reactions to Russia's special military operations in Ukraine in 2022. While Poland and the Czech Republic adhered firmly to the US-led NATO strategy to wage a proxy war against Russia, Slovakia and Hungary remain ambivalent and increasingly question the *raison d'état* of the war and have lately begun opposing the war.

Thus, when Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán as the chairman of the rotating EU presidency floated a peace plan recently in consultation with Donald Trump to end the Ukraine war, the EU promptly disowned it (at US behest, of course.)

On the other hand, Slovakian PM Robert Fico who survived an assassination attempt in May due to his refusal to back the Kiev regime stands shoulder to shoulder with Orbán. Incidentally, there is a school of thought that the needle of suspicion in the assassination attempt on Fico in May points to Ukraine's military intelligence. So much for a common Eastern European stance on Ukraine war- or Russia for that matter!

In fact, both Orbán and Fico advocate good relations and resumption of beneficial ties with Russia. They thoroughly disapprove the EU's sanctions against Russia. Such being the state of play, how could Modi government have been so incredibly foolish as to imagine that India's route to European engagement lies through Kiev and/or disengagement from Russia? Evidently, it is a lie.

The problem is not that India's stance on Ukraine hinders the expansion of economic relations with Europe but the absence of an imaginative, robust economic diplomacy in a long-term perspective.

Although EU is India's largest trading partner, accounting for €124 billion worth of trade in goods in 2023 (or 12.2% of total Indian trade), trade negotiations with EU have been dragging on for well over a decade. The [EU's stated objective](#) is "to work towards a sound, transparent, open, non-discriminatory and predictable regulatory and business environment for European companies trading with or investing in India."

But Delhi is in no hurry as trade is growing impressively (by almost 90% in the last decade) and trade in services between the EU and India reached €50.8 billion in 2023, up from €30.4 billion in 2020 — and, most important, the balance of trade remains in India's favour.

In reality, without waiting for the Ukraine war to end, Delhi can take a look at China's strategy to enter the European market through the East European gateway. China created a platform with Central and Eastern European countries known as the "14+1." Hungary, Slovakia and Poland are important partners for China in this framework.

Orbán has been embracing Chinese investments despite the EU's call for "derisking" while Fico is set to visit China. And the most interesting part is that it's not just the pair of leaders currently viewed as the EU's pro-Russian wild cards who are playing this game. Poland's President Andrzej Duda, a tough critic of Moscow's war against Ukraine, also just concluded a state visit hosted by his counterpart Xi Jinping in China.

Indeed, China continues to be on a charm offensive in Central and Eastern Europe. A [new study](#) from the European Think Tank Network on China says Hungary is an “outlier” regarding national measures on derisking from China. The report says that “Orbán’s government takes pride in attracting a growing number of Chinese investors to the country.”

Indeed, [Hungary is becoming Europe’s electric vehicle hub](#) - by courting Chinese carmakers. Fico is attracted to Orbán’s route and plans to conclude a strategic partnership agreement with China during his planned visit in fall. Now, don’t Hungary, Slovakia and Poland know that China and Russia have a quasi-alliance today, which is at an all-time level and only strengthening by the day because of the fallouts of Ukraine war such as western sanctions?

Our media pundits are clueless about Eastern Europe. Yet they are advocating India’s disengagement from Russia as a prerequisite of warm relations with that region! Why are they doing this? Such perverted logic only promotes American interests to erode India-Russia partnership and thereby erode the country’s strategic autonomy.

Going forward, it’s too really to tell now as to what form Ukraine takes as it emerges from this war. Ukraine has unresolved nationality questions. And territories in western Ukraine previously belonged to Poland (which was of course compensated with territories of defeated Germany) and Hungary before World War 2.

[Poland says](#) the 1943-44 massacre of some 100,000 Poles by Ukrainian nationalists was genocide. And today, the crux of the matter, from Russian perspective too, is that Ukraine’s identity as a sovereign state itself is built around the same neo-Nazi organisations that collaborated with Hitler’s occupation army to massacre Poles. [Truly, this is a can of worms](#). India has no good reason to meddle with it.

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Featured image: Poland’s government announced last year the discovery of a mass burial pit in Ukraine containing remains of ethnic Poles murdered by pro-Nazi Ukrainian nationalists in waves of World War 2 massacres. (Source: Indian Punchline)

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