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## The Reaction of the Central European Initiative and the Bulgarian Government on the Russian Aggression Against Ukraine During the Bulgarian Presidency Held in the CEI in 2022

STUDIA I ANALIZY

**Key words:** Bulgaria, Central European Initiative (CEI), Russia, Ukraine, war

**Abstract:** *The Initiative's reaction on the war in Ukraine is decisive. The initiative issued a number of statements condemning Russia's military actions. It also decided to suspend Belarus from CEI membership rights due to the country's involvement in the war. Moreover, CEI provided material and financial assistance to Ukraine. The activities of the Initiative prove that the Initiative performs many important tasks for the security and stability of Central and Eastern Europe and effectively responds to the challenges that Europe is currently facing. However, Bulgaria's position on this issue has been divided since the beginning of the Russian aggression. The lack of consensus among political parties at the level of declarations causes some problems with direct aid to this country.*

### Introduction

On the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale war against Ukraine and became the subject of international criticism. The war in Ukraine has exposed the brutality of the Russian Federation while uniting the Western world like never before. It also showed the West's great solidarity with the struggling Ukraine. In this text, I present what actions Central European

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Initiative (CEI) has taken in 2022 as part of its assistance to Ukraine. The aim of this article is to present the reaction of the CEI on this military aggression, as well as the position of the Bulgarian government on this issue during the same period.

It can be assumed that the importance of the Initiative for the countries of this part of Europe is being marginalized and that the rank of this form of cooperation is gradually decreasing over the years. However, the Initiative performs many tasks that are important for the security and stability of Central and Eastern Europe, and its activity effectively responds to the challenges that Europe is currently facing.

In 2019, the Central European Initiative celebrated its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary. This fact is undoubtedly an argument for resuming the discussion in the scientific discourse on the role and importance of the Initiative for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

The last few years have been particularly special for Europe and the entire world due to the COVID-19 pandemic. 2022 was a year of recovery from the crisis after the pandemic, but it was also special due to Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine. For Bulgaria, which will take over the presidency of the CEI in 2022, the last few years have also been difficult due to the crisis caused by the pandemic, but also due to the prolonged political crisis, which resulted in the inability to form a lasting government. In the context of the CEI itself, the issue of the future of the Initiative and its condition, as well as a certain agency and effectiveness in the activities for which it was established, is debatable. All these issues are especially important when we take into account the fact that Austria – a key participant in this format of cooperation – left its ranks a few years ago. The issue of Italy's foreign policy for this area also remains debatable, as a country that has also been a key participant in the CEI format from the beginning. In such external and internal circumstances, Bulgaria took over the presidency of the Initiative on January 1, 2022.

Due to the actuality of the discussed issue, the source basis for the analysis of the CEI's position on Russian aggression against Ukraine is the information published on the official website of the Initiative and the materials made available to me by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland. In the context of analyzing the position of the Bulgarian government, available literature on the subject was used, i.e. scientific articles, monographs and Internet sources.

## A brief historical outline

Established over thirty years ago, the Central European Initiative is the first and at the same time the oldest form of regional cooperation of the post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe<sup>1</sup>. The establishment of the Initiative was a response to the geopolitical changes that took place with the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe. The initiative was launched in November 1989 in Budapest as the Quadragonale Initiative<sup>2</sup>. At that time, it consisted of four countries: Italy, Austria, Hungary and Yugoslavia (SFRY). In March 1990, Czechoslovakia received observer status in CEI, which finally joined the Initiative in May of the same year. After the joining of Czechoslovakia, the Initiative adopted the name Pentagonale. In May 1991, Poland obtained observer status, and in July of the same year it joined the Initiative. As a result of this expansion, the Initiative was renamed Hexagonale.

The disintegration of Yugoslavia, which began in 1991, caused countries such as Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina to apply for the accession to the Hexagonale. In March 1992, these countries received observer status, and in July of the same year they became full members of the Initiative<sup>3</sup>. At that time, at the request of Austria, a decision was made to change the name to the Central European Initiative. Under this name, the group has been operating continuously to this day.

In the following years, the Initiative was joined by: FYROM (now North Macedonia), the Czech Republic and Slovakia (after the dissolution of Czecho-

<sup>1</sup> Official website of the CEI: <https://www.cei.int/> (13.03.2023). More in: G. Bernatowicz, *Nowy europejski regionalizm*, «Sprawy Międzynarodowe» 1994, No. 3, pp. 29–44; G. Bernatowicz, *Inicjatywa Środkowoeuropejska*, [in:] S. Parzymies (ed.), *Europejskie struktury współpracy: informator*, Warsaw 1995, pp. 215–232; C. Cviic, *The Central European Initiative*, [in:] A. Cottey (ed.), *Subregional Cooperation in the New Europe*, London 1999, pp. 113–127; A.A. Reisch, *The Central European Initiative: To Be Or Not to Be*, «RFE/RL Research Report» 1993, No. 34, pp. 30–37.

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem. More in: J.M. Fiszer, *Geneza i działalność Inicjatywy Środkowoeuropejskiej*, «Przegląd Politologiczny» 2001, No. 1–2, pp. 19–30; A. Orzelska-Stączek, *Współpraca regionalna w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w polskiej polityce zagranicznej*, «Myśl Ekonomiczna i Polityczna» 2015, No. 2, pp. 238–262; J. Tomala-Wawrowska, *Polska perspektywa współpracy regionalnej w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w okresie pozimnowojennym*, [in:] M. Stolarczyk (ed.), *Stosunki Polski z sąsiadami w pierwszej dekadzie XXI wieku*, Katowice 2011, pp. 249–284; J. Wojnicki, *Inicjatywa Środkowoeuropejska jako forma współpracy państw postkomunistycznych*, «Przegląd Humanistyczny» 2006, No. 3 (396), Vol. 50, pp. 121–135.

<sup>3</sup> More in: G. Bernatowicz, *Inicjatywa Środkowoeuropejska...*; E. Cziomer, *Rola Hexagonale w kształtowaniu jedności europejskiej*, [in:] E. Cziomer (ed.), «Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego. Prace z Nauk Politycznych», No. 48, Krakow.

slovakia) (1993), Albania, Bulgaria, Belarus, Moldova, Romania, Ukraine (1996), Serbia (FRY) (2000) and Montenegro (2006)<sup>4</sup>.

The purpose of establishing cooperation within the CEI was the determination of post-communist countries to make Central and Eastern Europe independent of Soviet influence. This, in turn, was supposed to strengthen the position of the countries of this part of Europe, to build ties between these countries, and to positively influence their image on the international arena. The post-communist countries then focused their foreign policy on the integration with Euro-Atlantic structures (the European Union and NATO). Achieving this goal, however, was impossible at the beginning of the transformation, due to the numerous internal problems that these countries struggled with in the initial phase of the democratization processes. The answer to this situation was therefore regional cooperation, which was to be an intermediate stage in the process of integration with the EU and NATO.

The CEI was established as an intergovernmental political, economic and cultural forum, and its basic objectives were formulated in Venice in 1990 and were political, economic and social nature<sup>5</sup>. CEI's activities include, above all, political consultations. The initiative operates at the governmental, parliamentary and economic levels, and has recently also been developing cooperation on a local scale. The main mechanisms of CEI operation<sup>6</sup> are the annual meetings of the heads of government of the member states (CEI Summit) and ministers of foreign affairs (MFA meetings) organized by the country holding the presidency. This function is assigned to the country hosting the summit in a given calendar year. In addition to summit meetings of prime ministers and meetings of foreign ministers, there are also regular meetings of the Committee of National Coordinators of CEI, as well as meetings of the Parliamentary Assembly and the Parliamentary Committee of the CEI. In the economic dimension, the most proven mechanism of CEI operation is the annual Economic Forum. In addition, expert meetings, conferences and seminars are also regularly held as part of the Initiative. The permanent body of the CEI is the Executive Secretariat in Trieste, established in 1996 and headed by the Secretary General. The Central European Initiative cooperates with various international organizations and institutions, primarily with the European

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<sup>4</sup> See: *Member States*, <https://www.cei.int/member-states> (25.04.2023).

<sup>5</sup> See in: J. Tomala-Wawrowska, *Polska perspektywa współpracy regionalnej...*; G. Bernatowicz, *Inicjatywa Środkowoeuropejska...*

<sup>6</sup> *CEI Guidelines and Rules of Procedure*, *cei.int.*, April 2022, [https://www.cei.int/sites/default/files/2022-12/109\\_CEI%20Guidelines%20and%20Rules%20of%20Procedure%20FINAL.docx](https://www.cei.int/sites/default/files/2022-12/109_CEI%20Guidelines%20and%20Rules%20of%20Procedure%20FINAL.docx) (23.03.2023).

Union, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the United Nations, the OECD, the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the World Bank.

Until recently, the Initiative included 18 countries, but in 2018 Austria left the Initiative, which was one of the co-founding countries of the CEI and had a leading position in it next to Italy<sup>7</sup>. Currently, the group consists of 17 countries, but the status of Belarus as a CEI member state was suspended in March 2022<sup>8</sup>, due to the country's involvement in Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine.

## The reaction of the Bulgarian government on the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022

For Bulgaria, which took over the presidency of the CEI in 2022, recent years have been particularly difficult due to the protracted political crisis<sup>9</sup> resulting in the inability to form a lasting government. Over the course of two years, i.e. 2021–2023, early parliamentary elections<sup>10</sup> were held in Bulgaria several

<sup>7</sup> The position of the Secretary General has been held by Italy or Austria on a rotational basis since the CEI's inception. The last Austrian Secretary General was the leading diplomat Margot Klestil-Löffler. See in: A. Wölfl, *Österreich tritt aus der Zentraleuropäischen Initiative aus*, *Der Standard Zeitung*, 11.07.2018, <https://www.derstandard.de/story/2000081380223/oesterreich-tritt-aus-der-zentraleuropaeischen-initiative-aus> (24.03.2023); *Österreich tritt aus der Zentraleuropäischen Initiative aus*, *der.orf.at*, 11.06.2018, <https://orf.at/v2/stories/2442418/> (24.03.2023). Currently, the position of Secretary is held by the Italian Roberto Antonione.

<sup>8</sup> *Statement by the Bulgarian CEI Presidency and the CEI-Executive Secretariat on the suspension of the Republic of Belarus from the Central European Initiative*, *cei.int.*, 25.03.2022, <https://www.cei.int/news/9261/statement-by-the-bulgarian-cei-presidency-and-the-cei-executive-secretariat-on-the-suspension-of-the> (13.03.2023). More in: G. Bernatowicz, *Inicjatywa Środkowoeuropejska...* It is worth noting that in the history of the Initiative there was already a case of suspension of a member state in the rights of a member. The case concerned Yugoslavia (FRY). This issue was devoted to a special meeting of foreign ministers of CEI member countries in November 1991 in Venice. Yugoslavia was eliminated from the group's work. The then Hexagonale condemned the use of force, called for negotiations and supported the sanctions adopted by the UN.

<sup>9</sup> More in: J. Wojnicki, *Problemy współczesnego parlamentaryzmu bułgarskiego – zagadnienia instytucjonalne i funkcjonalne*, «*Studia Politologiczne*» 2023, Vol. 69, pp. 82–96; M. Czernicka, *Ewolucja systemu partyjnego i sceny politycznej w Bułgarii w latach 1990–2017 – od dwublokowości do wielopartyjności*, «*Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*» 2021, z. 2, pp. 283–300; M. Czernicka, *Współczesna Bułgaria w obliczu wybranych zagrożeń politycznych, ekonomicznych i społecznych*, «*Sprawy Międzynarodowe*» 2019, No. 1, pp. 241–258.

<sup>10</sup> J. Pieńkowski, *Bułgaria w okresie międzywyborczym*, «*Biuletyn PISM*» 2021, No. 117 (2315), 16.06.2021, [https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/Bulgaria\\_w\\_okresie\\_miedzywyborczym](https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/Bulgaria_w_okresie_miedzywyborczym) (10.12.2023); S. Domaradzki, *Bułgaria; harwardzki duumwirat*, «*Komentarze IES*» 2022,

times, which brought relative stability only for a short period of time. The currently ruling coalition, which includes Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria – Union of Democratic Forces (GERB – SDS) and the We Continue Change – Democratic Bulgaria (PP-DB) bloc, was formed as a result of the elections held in April 2023<sup>11</sup>. The Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), There is a Nation (ITN), the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and the Rebirth party also entered parliament. The current ruling coalition was formed on the basis of a coalition agreement, based on which Nikolai Denkov (recommended by PP and DB) was appointed prime minister for the first two years, and Marija Gabriel (GERB), who will be prime minister for the next two years. This solution is intended to make it easier for parties to function and govern efficiently.

When the Russian aggression against Ukraine began on February 24, 2022, the government in Bulgaria was ruled by a coalition formed by the PP-DB, ITN and BSP parties, and Kirill Petkov (PP) was the prime minister<sup>12</sup>. The GERB party was in opposition to it. Issuing a joint declaration unanimously condemning Russian aggression was problematic in the case of Bulgaria due to the strong pro-Russian attitudes of some political groups<sup>13</sup>. It was impossible to reach a common position because the draft declaration was criticized by socialists and supported by politicians from the pro-Russian Rebirth party, especially regarding the imposition of international sanctions on Russia. In the final version, this point was adopted, although the socialists insisted that each point of the declaration had to be voted on separately, so that they could

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No. 495, (7/22), 19.01.2022, <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/bulgaria-harwardzki-duumwirat/> (10.12.2023); S. Domaradzki, *Rząd techniczny Gylyba Donewa – krok w kierunku powrotu „modelu Borisowa”*, «Komentarze IES» 2022, No. 685, (197/2022), 8.09.2022, <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/rzad-techniczny-gylyba-donewa-krok-w-kierunku-powrotu-modelu-borisowa/> (10.12.2023); E. Manołowa, *Prezydent Bułgarii rozwiązał parlament i wydał dekret o powołaniu tymczasowego rządu*, *Gazetaprawna.pl*, 2.02.2023, <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/kraj/artykuly/8651925,bulgaria-prezydent-rozwiazal-parlament-i-wydal-dekret-o-powolaniu-kolejnego-tymczasowego-rzadu.html> (10.12.2023).

<sup>11</sup> Ł. Kobeszko, *Nowy rząd w Bułgarii: czasowa stabilizacja władzy wykonawczej*, «Analizy OSW», 7.06.2023, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2023-06-07/nowy-rzad-w-bulgarii-czasowa-stabilizacja-wladzy-wykonawczej> (10.12.2023).

<sup>12</sup> Before Petkov's government, i.e. in 2021, there were two interim cabinets in Bulgaria of Stefan Janev, a close associate of president Rumen Radev. Petkov's government operated from December 2021 to June 2022. After that time, technical governments were also in force in Bulgaria and two interim cabinets of Gylyb Donev were established (August 2022 – June 2023). The current coalition was selected as a result of the April 2023 elections.

<sup>13</sup> С. Костадинова, *НС осъди руската агресия след срамни препирни за санкции срещу Москва*, 24.02.2022, *Mediapool.bg*, <https://www.mediapool.bg/ns-osadi-ruskata-agresiya-sled-sramni-prepirni-za-sanktsii-sreshtu-moskva-news332618.html> (1.12.2023).

not vote “for” the one that included sanctions. Ultimately, it was adopted with 191 votes in favour (PP, GERB, DPS, ITN and DB), 14 votes against (one from the BSP and all 14 from the Rebirth party) and 20 abstentions (18 from the BSP and 2 from the PP). The adopted declaration reads, among other things, that although parliamentarians condemn the “gross violation of international law by the Russian Federation and violation of the territorial integrity” of Ukraine, Bulgarian parliamentarians do not categorically support the introduction of stricter sanctions against Russia. In the final version of the document, the parliament supported “discussion on a package of measures, including sanctions, to de-escalate the conflict”. The declaration also states that the Bulgarian parliament “demands that the Russian Federation immediately cease hostilities and return to full compliance with international law”<sup>14</sup>.

The ambiguous attitude of the Bulgarian government towards the Russian aggression in the initial phase of the war in Ukraine was also intensified by the fact that Stefan Janev himself, then Minister of Defence in Petkov’s government, and even earlier prime minister of the Bulgarian government, refused to call the Russian invasion of Ukraine a war and called it a “special operation”, while advocating for Bulgaria to remain neutral<sup>15</sup>. As a result, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of March, 2022, he was dismissed from the position of Minister of Defence. Bulgarian President Rumen Radev, who is not officially supported by any party but sympathizes with socialists and has the support of the pro-Russian Rebirth party, was also very cautious about the Russian attack at the beginning of the aggression. Ultimately, he supported the parliament’s declaration condemning Russian aggression, but a year earlier during the election campaign he was not so willing to criticize Russia. The president has been openly balancing on the verge of neutrality since the beginning of the war. It expresses reluctance to send weapons to Kiev and opposes Ukraine’s entry into NATO. Ultimately, as head of state, Rumen Radev supported the official position of the parliament and expressed his opinion regarding aggression and aid for Ukraine on the international forum by signing the letter<sup>16</sup> of the presidents of Central European countries on the fast track of Ukraine’s candidacy for the EU.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>15</sup> S. Domaradzki, *Bułgaria wobec wojny rosyjsko-ukraińskiej. Zmiana ministra obrony*, «Komentarze IEŚ» 2022, No. 552, (64/2022), 8.03.2022, <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/bulgaria-wobec-wojny-rosyjsko-ukraińskiej-zmiana-ministra-obrony/> (7.12.2023); Ł. Kobeszko, *Bułgaria wobec agresji na Ukrainę*, «Analizy OSW», 15.04.2022, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2022-04-15/bulgaria-wobec-agresji-na-ukraine> (10.12.2023).

<sup>16</sup> This letter was signed by the presidents of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia and Bulgaria. See in: *Support of Ukraine’s swift candidacy to the EU*, 28.02.2022, president.pl, <https://www.president.pl/news/open-letter-by->



The development of events in Ukraine has confronted Bulgarian politicians with the challenge of modernizing the army and strengthening the defence of the country and NATO's eastern flank. The then prime minister Kirill Petkov loudly expressed his pro-European and pro-Atlantic attitudes, seeking support for his views among coalition partners and other political groups. Although there was generally a consensus among the main political groups on the need to modernize the army, the BSP became more strongly opposed to this idea with the beginning of the Russian invasion. The socialists openly claimed that there was no danger to Bulgaria from Russia and there was no need to strengthen the army, and there was no need to deploy new armed forces on the territory of the country. In this respect, prime minister Petkov also found no understanding with president Radev.

The lack of consensus among political parties on the level of declarations regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine also translates into certain problems with direct aid to this country. In this context, there are also visible differences among political groups<sup>17</sup>. Although Bulgaria was the first country to close its airspace to Russian planes at the beginning of the war, in the context of, for example, supplying weapons and ammunition to Ukraine, this political discord and political disputes are visible, which hinder efficient operation. At the beginning of the war, prime minister Kirill Petkov sought to obtain parliamentary consent to deliver weapons to Ukraine. Due to the strong opposition of the socialists, he was unable to force this consent through. Bulgaria was the last NATO country, apart from Hungary, not to formally supply weapons to Ukrainians, which was the subject of criticism in the NATO. In May 2022, parliamentary consent was obtained exclusively for the repair of Ukrainian military equipment at Bulgarian repair facilities<sup>18</sup>. Under the next government, elected as a result of the parliamentary elections in October 2022 (the interim cabinet of Gylyb Donev), the Bulgarian parliament agreed to the supply of weapons. However, the consent only concerned the supply of light weapons, and not heavy equipment, which both Ukraine and NATO had repeatedly requested from the Bulgarians.

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presidents-in-support-of-ukraines-swift-candidacy-to-the-european-union,49584 (6.12.2023).

<sup>17</sup> Ł. Kobeszko, *Lepiej późno niż wcale. Zgoda parlamentu Bułgarii na dostawy broni dla Ukrainy*, «Analizy OSW», 16.11.2022, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2022-11-16/lepiej-pozno-niz-wcale-zgoda-parlamentu-bulgarii-na-dostawy-broni-dla> (9.12.2023).

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem.



The current cabinet of Nikolai Denkov is also seeking more decisive support for Ukraine and the modernization of the domestic army<sup>19</sup>. In November 2023, in accordance with the intergovernmental agreement concluded between Sofia and Kiev, the agreement under which heavy equipment was to be delivered to Ukraine was ratified by the Bulgarian parliament. However, this agreement was quickly vetoed<sup>20</sup> by president Radev.

At the beginning of 2023, according to various press reports<sup>21</sup>, there are many indications that, in fact, from the beginning of the war in its first key weeks, Bulgaria has secretly supplied military equipment and fuel to Ukraine and continues to do so, and the equipment supplied to Ukrainians turns out to be very useful in conditions war. In response to these actions, in April 2022, Russia suspended gas supplies to Bulgaria for some time.

To sum up, both at the level of declarations and direct commitment to Ukraine, there are big problems in Bulgaria. In the background of the aid, there is a political fight taking place with the participation of the largest political groups and the president himself. The developments in Ukraine have shown how deep the divisions are in the Bulgarian parliament and in the ruling coalition itself.

## The reaction of the Central European Initiative on the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022

When Russian troops crossed the Ukrainian border and launched a full-scale invasion, the Initiative issued appropriate statements condemning these military actions. On the day the war broke out, i.e. on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022, the Secretary General of CEI, Roberto Antonione, issued a short statement:

<sup>19</sup> *Bułgaria zmienia politykę wobec pomocy dla Ukrainy*, Defence24., 12.06.2023, <https://defence24.pl/wojna-na-ukrainie-raport-specjalny-defence24/bulgaria-zmienia-polityke-wobec-pomocy-dla-ukrainy> (11.12.2023).

<sup>20</sup> M. Tomczak, *Nagły zwrot akcji. Prezydent Bułgarii zablokował pomoc dla Ukrainy*, tech.wp.pl., 4.12.2023, <https://tech.wp.pl/nagly-zwrot-akcji-prezydent-bulgarii-zablokowal-pomoc-dla-ukrainy,6970106169080320a> (11.12.2023); A. Rybczyński, *Wojna na górze w Bułgarii. Chodzi o modernizację armii i pomoc Ukrainie*, 5.12.2023, <https://www.tvp.info/74561445/antoni-rybczynski-wojna-na-gorze-w-bulgarii-chodzi-o-modernizacje-armii-i-pomoc-ukrainie> (11.12.2023).

<sup>21</sup> P. Volkmann-Schluck, *Das Land, das heimlich die Ukraine rettete*, welt.de, 20.01.2023, <https://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/plus243262783/Bulgarien-Das-Land-das-heimlich-die-Ukraine-rettete.html?icid=search.product.onsitesearch> (12.12.2023); *Sofia secretly selling old weapons meant for Ukraine via Romania and Poland*, bivol.bg, 19.07.2022, <https://bivol.bg/en/sofia-secretly-selling-old-weapons-meant-for-ukraine-via-romania-and-poland.html> (11.12.2023).

“In this difficult moment, as Secretary General of the Executive Secretariat of the Central European Initiative, I wish to express our solidarity with Ukraine and its people, and our support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country, a valuable Member State of the CEI. I hope the respect for the principles of international law may still prevail. Condemning the military action against Ukraine, we stand by its Government and citizens”<sup>22</sup>.

Following him, a similar statement was issued in March 2022 by the CEI Executive Secretariat<sup>23</sup>.

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of March 2022, the status of the Republic of Belarus as a CEI member state was suspended<sup>24</sup>, due to the country’s involvement in Russia’s armed aggression against Ukraine. Formally, the procedure of suspending Belarus from CEI membership rights was launched by Bulgaria, which held the presidency of the Initiative in 2022. The decision to suspend Belarus with immediate effect was taken by all Initiative countries in writing. Only Belarus was against<sup>25</sup> the suspension decision.

According to Art. 29 of the CEI Guidelines and Rules of Procedure<sup>26</sup>, in a situation where the decision-making bodies of the CEI are not meeting, a written procedure may be used for the adoption of certain decisions. The proposed solution is prepared by the state holding the presidency and distributed to other Member States via the CEI Executive Secretariat. In this situation, the solution applies that if there is no objection from the CEI countries within 15 working days after sending the note, the decision is considered binding.

The starting point for the suspension of Belarus was the verbal note of the 4<sup>th</sup> of March 2022<sup>27</sup>, which was prepared by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Bulgaria and sent to the ministries of foreign affairs of the other CEI countries. The decision to suspend was taken primarily on the basis of Art. 2, 9 of the CEI Guidelines and Rules of Procedure<sup>28</sup>, as well as referring to the provisions of art. 28 and 29.

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<sup>22</sup> *Secretary General's statement on military action against Ukraine*, cei.int, 24.02.2022, <https://www.cei.int/news/9231/secretary-generals-statement-on-military-action-against-ukraine> (17.04.2023).

<sup>23</sup> *We stand with Ukraine!*, cei.int, 1.03.2022, <https://www.cei.int/news/9232/we-stand-with-ukraine> (18.04.2023).

<sup>24</sup> *Statement by the Bulgarian CEI Presidency and the CEI-Executive Secretariat on the suspension...*

<sup>25</sup> *Belarus' suspension from CEI slammed as premature, unjustified decision*, BelTA, belta.by, 19.04.2022, <https://eng.belta.by/society/view/belarus-suspension-from-cei-slammed-as-premature-unjustified-decision-149622-2022/> (26.04.2023).

<sup>26</sup> *CEI Guidelines and Rules of Procedure...*

<sup>27</sup> Verbal note provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland (22.03.2023).

<sup>28</sup> *CEI Guidelines and Rules of Procedure...*

Article 2 of the CEI Guidelines and Rules of Procedure states:

“The Member States of the CEI are guided by the principles of the UN Charter, of all the documents of the Helsinki process/OSCE. They are guided as well by final declarations and documents of the meetings of the Heads of Government and the Foreign Ministers of the CEI (including those of the predecessor initiatives: Quadrilateral, Pentagonal, Hexagonal)”.

Article 9 of the CEI Guidelines and Rules of Procedure states:

“Any Member State of the CEI which has seriously violated the principles referred to in Art. 2 of the present Guidelines may be suspended from its rights of representation by the Foreign Ministers. If such Member State persists in these violations, the Heads of Government may decide that it has ceased to be a Member of the CEI. The decision on that matter should be taken following the rule of consensus minus one”.

Subsequently, Article 28 of the CEI Guidelines and Rules of Procedure states:

“Subject to the provisions of Art. 9, 16 and 22 the decisions within the CEI are taken by consensus as a general rule.

Consensus shall be understood to mean the absence of any objection expressed by a Member State and submitted by it as constituting an obstacle to the taking of the decision in question.

Questions arising under procedural matters shall be decided by a simple majority of Member States”.

Article 29 of the CEI Guidelines and Rules of Procedure states:

“When the decision-making organs of CEI are not in session, a written procedure may be applied for the adoption of decisions. The draft decisions circulated to the Member States by the Chairmanship-in-Office, through the CEI-ES, shall be considered as approved unless any objection preventing the adoption of a resolution or a decision is received within 15 working days from the communication of the draft by CEI-ES”.

The Initiative’s joint statement condemning the Russian aggression against Ukraine was released on the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 2022<sup>29</sup>. In this statement, the Initiative strongly condemned Russia’s unjustified military aggression, while emphasizing that the Russian invasion is a flagrant violation of international law and is contrary to every CEI principle. It was strongly emphasized that the Initiative stands on the side of Ukraine and its people and fully supports the sovereignty and territorial integrity of this country. At the same time, the statement emphasized the suspension of Belarus from CEI membership rights. Moreover,

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<sup>29</sup> *Joint Statement on the Russian War on Ukraine*, cei.int., 7.04.2022, <https://www.cei.int/news/9273/joint-statement-on-the-russian-war-on-ukraine> (19.04.2023).

Ukraine was exempted from the obligation to pay the annual contribution to the CEI Cooperation Fund<sup>30</sup>.

In 2022, there was no meeting at the highest level, i.e. a meeting of the heads of governments of CEI member states (CEI Summit). The last meeting of this importance took place during the Montenegrin Presidency in Budva in December 2021<sup>31</sup>. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, it was held in a hybrid form.

Therefore, in 2022, the meeting of the highest-ranking representatives of CEI member states were two meetings at the level of foreign ministers. Both of them were dominated by the topic of the war in Ukraine. The first meeting was informal<sup>32</sup> and took place in September in New York on the occasion of the meeting of the UN General Assembly, and the second was a formal meeting<sup>33</sup> and took place in November in Sofia.

During both meetings, the ministers of foreign affairs of the CEI member states unanimously underlined the main goals and tasks that the Initiative is currently implementing. The importance of security, stability in the region and diversification of energy sources was emphasized, especially in the face of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Therefore, the need to take more decisive action to increase energy and food security in the region was underlined. The ministers gave a clear signal that the Central European Initiative and all its member states condemn the armed aggression against Ukraine and express their readiness to provide military, financial and humanitarian assistance to the struggling Ukraine and its citizens. The declarations found their tangible dimension in the form of a joint statement<sup>34</sup> of the ministers of foreign affairs of the CEI countries, signed during a meeting in November in Sofia.

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<sup>30</sup> Ukraine was exempted from the obligation to pay the contribution in 2022 and 2023. The amount of the contribution planned for 2023 for Ukraine was EUR 21,000. For comparison, the amount of the contribution for suspended Belarus was EUR 18,000. Source: MFA RP.

<sup>31</sup> The Government of Montenegro, *Summit of the Heads of Government of the Central European Initiative (CEI) – Agenda*, 1.12.2021, <https://www.gov.me/en/documents/bff7873d-765e-4876-8ff7-4b095d5a3024> (12.04.2023); The Government of Montenegro, *CEI Summit list of participants*, 1.12.2021, <https://www.gov.me/en/documents/e39dc53f-9290-4966-95e6-3df7dcad1cfc> (12.04.2023); *Meeting of the Heads of Government (CEI Summit) – Joint Statement*, cei.int., 3.12.2021, <https://www.cei.int/sites/default/files/2022-03/101.2.003-21%20BUD%20Summit%20Joint%20Statement%20FINAL.pdf> (12.04.2023).

<sup>32</sup> *Informal MFA Meeting successfully held in New York*, cei.int., 23.09.2022, <https://www.cei.int/news/9430/informal-mfa-meeting-successfully-held-in-new-york> (12.04.2023).

<sup>33</sup> *MFA meeting in Sofia expresses strong solidarity with Ukraine, will for coordination and unity*, cei.int., 7.11.2022, <https://www.cei.int/news/9483/mfa-meeting-in-sofia-on-need-for-stronger-coordination-solidarity-and-unity> (12.04.2023).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*.

In addition, it is worth noting that the UN adopted a resolution on cooperation between the United Nations and the Central European Initiative<sup>35</sup>. The resolution was adopted with 102 votes in favour, 5 against and 28 abstentions. This was the first time that this resolution had been put to the vote, as previous resolutions were based on consensus. The text contains provisions condemning the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

The response of the Central European Initiative to the issue of helping Ukraine was also specific financial and material assistance. With the beginning of the war, the Initiative transferred through the Red Cross the first funds to help<sup>36</sup> the people of Ukraine (80,000 Euro). At the turn of July and August, in cooperation with the AVSI Foundation, it donated another 73,400 Euro<sup>37</sup>.

The Initiative was involved in the creation of a field hospital in Ukraine<sup>38</sup> and in the opening of the Ukrainian Educational Center<sup>39</sup> in Warsaw, whose main task is to educate Ukrainian refugees on many levels, integrate them with the local community and provide psychological support.

The Initiative's response to the issue of aggression against Ukraine was the participation of the CEI Executive Secretariat as an observer in a special session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe regarding assistance to Ukraine. This session was convened by Ukraine and 42 other Member States, including all 27 Member States of the European Union. During the session, it was proposed to prepare a special WHO report<sup>40</sup> assessing the health emergency in Ukraine.

<sup>35</sup> General Assembly of the United Nations, Resolution on Cooperation between the United Nations and the Central European Initiative adopted by the General Assembly on 21 November 2022, A77/L19, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/708/59/PDF/N2270859.pdf?OpenElement> (20.04.2023); *UNGA adopts resolution on cooperation between United Nations and Central European Initiative*, *cei.int.*, 23.11.2022, <https://www.cei.int/news/9502/unga-adopts-resolution-on-cooperation-between-united-nations-and-central-european-initiativ> (20.04.2023). In this regard, Resolution 66/111 of 9 December 2011 was invoked, under which CEI was granted observer status at the UN.

<sup>36</sup> *Humanitarian contribution of CEI to people of Ukraine*, *cei.int.*, 25.03.2022, <https://www.cei.int/news/9258/humanitarian-contribution-of-cei-to-people-of-ukraine> (19.04.2023).

<sup>37</sup> *Financial contribution for basic necessities in Kharkiv, Sumy and Poltava in Ukraine*, *cei.int.*, 1.08.2022, <https://www.cei.int/news/9403/financial-contribution-for-basic-necessities-in-kharkiv-sumy-and-poltava-in-ukraine> (19.04.2023).

<sup>38</sup> *Contribution to set up a field hospital in the southern part of Ukraine*, *cei.int.* 29.07.2022, <https://www.cei.int/news/9402/contribution-to-set-up-a-field-hospital-in-the-southern-part-of-ukraine> (19.04.2023).

<sup>39</sup> *Ukrainian Education Hub in Poland*, <https://poland.eduhub.org.ua/en/landing-page-en/> (20.04.2023); *CEI-supported Ukrainian educational hub opens in Poland*, *cei.int.*, 27.07.2022, <https://www.cei.int/news/9399/cei-supported-ukrainian-educational-hub-opens-in-poland> (19.04.2023).

<sup>40</sup> *World Health Organisation, Special session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe: summary and outcome*, 11.05.2022, <https://www.who.int/europe/news/item/11-05->

## Summary

For Bulgaria, which took over the presidency of the CEI in 2022, recent years have been particularly difficult due to the protracted political crisis resulting in the inability to form a lasting government. This situation resulted in big problems in Bulgaria, both at the level of declarations and direct involvement with Ukraine. When the war broke out, first there were problems with issuing a joint declaration condemning Russian aggression, and then both the then Minister of Defence of Bulgaria and the Bulgarian president expressed an ambiguous attitude towards the war. Bulgaria is also quite reluctant to modernize its army and strengthen NATO's eastern flank, as well as to supply weapons to Ukraine. In the background of the aid, there is a political fight taking place with the participation of the largest political groups and the president himself. The developments in the Ukraine have shown how deep the divisions are in the Bulgarian parliament and in the ruling coalition itself.

However, the Initiative's position on the war in Ukraine is decisive. In the moment when Russian troops crossed the Ukrainian border and started a full-scale war, the Central European Initiative immediately took a stand on the matter. Being the first and at the same time the oldest form of regional cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe, it immediately issued a number of statements condemning Russia's military actions and took a number of actions to help Ukraine.

In all statements issued in 2022, the Initiative condemns Russian aggression against Ukraine and calls on Russia to immediately cease hostilities. At the same time, it calls on all CEI member states to condemn this act and to take joint action to help Ukraine. In these statements, it emphasizes the importance of regional cooperation for the security and stability of this part of Europe.

The best example showing the Initiative's position on the war in Ukraine was the suspension of Belarus from CEI membership rights, as well as the release of Ukraine from the obligation to pay contributions to the Cooperation Fund. The Initiative's response to the question of helping Ukraine was also specific financial and material assistance. In 2022, several meetings were also held as part of the Initiative, including two at the level of foreign ministers, during which the prospects for further and more advanced cooperation to help Ukraine were discussed.

It can be assumed that the importance of the Initiative for the countries of this part of Europe is being marginalized and that the rank of this form of

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2022-special-session-of-the-who-regional-committee-for-europe--summary-and-outcome (19.04.2023).

cooperation is gradually decreasing over the years. The Russian invasion of Ukraine proved, however, that the Initiative performs many tasks that are important for the security and stability of Central and Eastern Europe, and that its activity effectively responds to the challenges that Europe is currently facing. By taking a number of actions to help Ukraine, the Central European Initiative reminded of its mission and the goals for which it was established.

**Annex No. 1.** CEI statements regarding Russian aggression and actions to help Ukraine

24.02.2022	Statement by CEI Secretary General Roberto Antonione condemning military aggression against Ukraine
1.03.2022	Announcement of the CEI Executive Secretariat condemning Russia's aggression against Ukraine
25.03.2022	Announcement on CEI humanitarian aid for Ukrainians (€80,000 donated by the Red Cross. The funds were provided by the CEI Executive Secretariat and the CEI Cooperation Fund)
25.03.2022	Statement by the Bulgarian Presidency and CEI Executive Secretariat condemning Russian aggression and suspending the Republic of Belarus from CEI membership rights
7.04.2022	CEI joint statement condemning Russian aggression against Ukraine. Ukraine was released from the obligation to pay the annual contribution to the CEI Cooperation Fund
10–11.05.2022	Special Session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe on assistance to Ukraine – with the participation of the CEI Executive Secretariat as an observer
25.07.2022	Opening of the Ukrainian Educational Center in Warsaw with the financial participation of the CEI Cooperation Fund
29.07.2022	Financial support of CEI in establishing a field hospital in Ukraine
1.08.2022	73,400 Euro of financial support for Ukraine
22.09.2022	Informal high-level meeting of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the occasion of the UN General Assembly (New York)
7.11.2022	High-level meeting of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the CEI member states in Sofia and issuing a joint document condemning Russian aggression against Ukraine
21.11.2022	Adoption of a UN resolution on cooperation between the United Nations and the Central European Initiative. The text contains provisions condemning Russian aggression against Ukraine.
2.12.2022	Continuation of activities within the Ukrainian Educational Center

Source: Own elaboration based on information from the CEI website.



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