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The European Union's Eastern Neighbourhood During the Russia-Ukraine War

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Abstract: *This paper examines the geopolitical implications of a weakened European Union (EU) in relation to Russian interests. A unified EU poses challenges to Russian policy, while internal discord offers Russia opportunities to advance its agenda. The EU's composition of 27 sovereign states often impedes cohesive action, especially in foreign, security, and defense policies, as noted by Judy Dempsey. This fragmentation benefits Russia, which exploits these divisions. The paper analyzes Russia's foreign policy leading up to the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict and explores the EU's role in security during the war, highlighting the impact of EU unity and discord on the crisis.*

Key words: Russia-Ukraine War, Ukraine, Russia, Ukraine's Security, Central Europe's Security

Introduction

The assertion that a weakened European Union (EU) benefits Russian interests in Europe is a crucial consideration in understanding contemporary geopolitical dynamics. When EU member states reach a consensus on their approach to Russia, they create significant obstacles to the advancement of Russian policy goals. However, internal discord and differing opinions within the EU present opportunities for Russia to further its political agenda. The EU's inherent composition of 27 sovereign states often hampers its ability to act as a unified entity on the global stage. This is vividly encapsulated by Judy Dempsey's observation that Europe's strength lies in having a cohesive foreign, security, and defense policy, elements which are currently lacking. The absence of unity in these critical areas prevents Europe from thinking and acting strategically, rendering it weak. Consequently, these divisions are advantageous to Russia, which skilfully exploits them to play member states against each other, thereby advancing its interests. The primary objective of this concise paper is to analyze Russia's foreign policy leading up to the full-scale conflict with Ukraine commencing in 2022. The final section of the paper delves into the dynamics of the Russia-Ukraine

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war, with particular attention to the role played by the European Union in the realm of security.

Russia's foreign policy: significant shifts in 2022

According to Andrei Tsygankov, the international context in which Russia defended its interests, changed. The West's capability to design and mould the international order was questioned in two domains. First of all, Russo-Georgian war of August 2008 broke the monopoly of USA and Europe for applying military force in global politics. Secondly, the global financial crisis revealed a critical gap in the economy of the West.¹ If, according to Tsygankov, we are truly dealing with a relative decline of the West's significance in international politics, and a change of leaders (superpowers) in global politics, defined as "the rise of the rest", the situation exerts significant impact upon Russia's foreign policies.² The relationships between the current Ukrainian crisis and the shift of power in international relations in recent years and the perception of these changes by Russia, is highlighted by another researcher, Richard Sakwa. He observes that recently, Russia has evolved towards neo-revisionist policy, which resulted in the confrontation in Ukraine.³ According to the author, the change in Russia's policy was driven by at least four issues. First of all, it was the gradual deterioration of relations with the EU. Secondly, it was the successive breakdown of the pan-European security system, where Russia acted as an autonomous partner cooperating with the West. Thirdly, Russia and remaining rising superpowers, e.g. China, contested America's claims of "uniqueness" and global leadership. Last but not least, the ideology of "democratism", which differs from the practice of democracy itself, constituted a catalyst for Russia's neo-revisionism. In other words, the researcher claims Russia believes that, for the West, the promotion of democracy constitutes an excuse for realisation of its strategic objectives.⁴

According to Sakwa, neo-revisionism does not constitute an attempt at a complete destruction of the present international order, but means that all superpowers will be forced to respect international rules of the game and recognise Russia as an equal in the system.⁵ On the other hand, Lilia Shevtsova believes that Russia's anti-West policy is determined by several external factors: 1) naivety of the West (a popular belief that support for Boris Yeltsin would contribute to Russia's democratisation); 2) cooperation with Russia at the cost of forsaking western values (the fact that liberal democracies ceased to be a role-model for Russia has become the most negative phenomenon of

¹ Tsygankov, 2010: 201.

² Tsygankov, 2010: 201.

³ Sakwa, 2015: 30.

⁴ Sakwa, 2015: 30.

⁵ Szabaciuk, 2013.

the past 20 years); 3) Russia failed to make use of the opportunities emerging after the defeat in the Cold War, and to transform into a state under the rule of the law.⁶ Adam D. Rotfeld describes Russia's new strategy in different terms. He observes that Russo-Georgian War of 2008 and events sparked off by the incidents of February/March 2014 in Ukraine, confirm the thesis that "Russia has not come to terms with the new political and legal reality resulting from the fall of USSR and emergence of 15 independent states in its place".⁷ Edward Lucas views Russia's foreign policy in recent years yet in another way. He believes that "in foreign policy, we ought not to view the Kremlin's strategic plans in western categories. Putin's primary objective for Russia is neither for it to be a grand, flourishing economy, nor the centre of a significant geopolitical coalition. His primary objective is to maintain power and weaken the West, which may be his only real opponent. America and the EU combined, with their 800 million citizens and 40 billion GDP, would easily trump Russia and its 140 million citizens and 1,6 billion GDP. Therefore, Putin's chief goal will be to divide the West and instigate unrest".⁸

The role of the European Union in the security sphere amidst the Russia-Ukraine war

We are presently observing the erosion of the security framework instituted during the era of bipolar global division, amidst an altered environmental and geopolitical landscape.⁹ Moreover, it is imperative to acknowledge that institutions inherently exhibit a degree of stativity, while the dynamics of emerging threats and challenges demand constant recognition. Consequently, institutions and organizations find themselves hampered in their ability to seamlessly adjust to the evolving international conditions within which they operate.¹⁰ The fall of the bipolar security system resulted in the emergence of a new order. Some superpowers aim to reinforce their own rules of the game in such a situation. Attempts to subordinate Ukraine to the rules of the *russskiy mir*, i.e. "the Russian world", may serve as an example of such a "new game without rules".¹¹

The Ukrainian conflict revealed that the post-Cold War international order has changed. As a consequence, an in-depth analysis of its nature is required. The Ukrainian crisis, also known as the Ukraine Crisis, constitutes something more than a mere conflict associated with Eastern Europe. It can be inferred that the international crisis is

⁶ Szewcowa, 2015.

⁷ Rotfeld, 2014.

⁸ Lubowski, 2016.

⁹ See Webber, 2014; Krastev, 2015: 8; see also Schimmelfennig, Leuffen & Rittberger, 2015.

¹⁰ Rotfeld, 2014.

¹¹ Rotfeld, 2014.

reflected in the rivalry between two external entities over Ukraine – the West (the USA and the EU) and Russia.¹² According to Andreas Umland, the Ukrainian crisis pertains to the devaluation of the so-called Budapest Memorandum of 1994 (Russia, the USA and the UK’s security assurances for Ukraine in exchange for it joining the NPT). Consequently, it thwarts efforts contributing to the prevention of WMD proliferation; exerts a negative impact on Russia’s economy as an important actor in international relations; postpones Russia’s integration with Europe, which hinders the implementation of A Wider Europe idea; and inhibits the development of a free trade and security zone spanning from Lisbon to Vladivostok.¹³

Moreover, when analysing the Russian Federation’s security policy over the past few years, the conclusion that Russia attempts to develop a security system based on military power at the expense of limiting its co-dependence upon international relations can be made. As a consequence, with regards to the Ukrainian crisis, institutions such as NATO, but also the EU, will be forced to change their approach and perception of the international security system. The events occurring in the Near East (especially the war in Syria) and terrorist attacks, which diminish a sense of security in western European countries, are not without impact upon the change of western institutions’ approach towards the security system.

Central European countries, particularly Poland, should prioritize fostering relations with neighbouring countries of the European Union and NATO, thereby mitigating divisions exemplified by the Bug River. It is crucial to recall the imperative of these new EU member states in stabilizing the situation on the eastern flank, averting poverty, and preventing civil unrest. Essentially, their responsibility lies in thwarting the emergence and progression of a “grey zone of security” in Eastern Europe. These nations, firmly integrated into the EU, should actively support Eastern Europe, contributing to the implementation of substantial systemic changes, facilitating economic transformation, and nurturing civil society development. The imperative to transform Eastern European countries, with a specific focus on Ukraine, is rooted in their own vested interests and is aligned with the broader interests of the EU.¹⁴

Conclusions

During the Russia-Ukraine war, the European Union adopted a comprehensive and multifaceted approach toward its Eastern Policy, aiming to address the conflict, support Ukraine, and manage its relations with Russia. The EU’s response included:

¹² See Zięba, 2014: 15.

¹³ Umland, 2015.

¹⁴ Stępniewski, 2011: 295-320.

- The EU imposed economic sanctions on Russia in response to its annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its involvement in the war in eastern Ukraine. These sanctions targeted key sectors of the Russian economy, including finance, energy, and defense, and were periodically renewed and expanded in coordination with the United States and other Western allies.
- The EU provided extensive financial and technical assistance to Ukraine to strengthen its democratic institutions, promote economic reforms, and support its territorial integrity. This assistance included financial aid packages, trade facilitation measures, and support for reforms in areas such as governance, energy, and the rule of law.
- The EU actively engaged in diplomatic initiatives to help resolve the conflict and promote dialogue between Russia and Ukraine. It supported the Normandy Format talks, involving Ukraine, Russia, Germany, and France, aiming to find a peaceful solution to the conflict. The EU also endorsed the Minsk Agreements, which outlined a roadmap for a ceasefire and a political settlement in eastern Ukraine.
- The EU sought to reduce its dependence on Russian energy supplies and increase energy security in the region. It promoted energy diversification by supporting the development of alternative energy sources, improving energy efficiency, and enhancing interconnectivity among member states. The EU also emphasized the importance of adhering to the principles of the Energy Union, which aimed to create a single energy market within the EU.
- The EU provided support for Ukraine's defense capabilities and security sector reform. This included the provision of non-lethal military equipment, capacity-building programs, and training for the Ukrainian armed forces. The EU also emphasized the importance of cooperative security arrangements and promoted confidence-building measures in the region.
- The EU played a significant role in providing humanitarian aid to those affected by the conflict in Ukraine. This aid included support for internally displaced persons (IDPs), healthcare services, food assistance, and shelter provision.

Overall, the EU's Eastern Policy during the Russia-Ukraine war aimed to support Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, promote stability in the region, and encourage a peaceful resolution to the conflict through diplomatic means. It combined economic, diplomatic, security, and humanitarian measures to address the complex challenges posed by the war and manage the EU's relations with both Ukraine and Russia.

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