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# The evolution of the European Union's eastern neighbourhood since the Russia-Ukraine war

Jak ewoluowało wschodnie sąsiedztwo Unii Europejskiej od czasu wojny rosyjsko-ukraińskiej

**Abstract:** This concise paper explores the intricate relationship between the dynamics of the European Union and Russia's interests in Europe, emphasizing the advantages perceived by Russia in a weakened EU. The paper is comprised of three sections: firstly, it examines the collapse of the Soviet Union and its impact on newly independent states, establishing the geopolitical landscape. The subsequent section traces Russia's foreign policy leading to the 2022 conflict with Ukraine, with a focus on Ukraine's pivotal role as a geopolitical flashpoint. The final section explores the dynamics of the Russia-Ukraine war, specifically addressing the European Union's role in security. The paper concludes by addressing the 2022 escalation, marked by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, highlighting the imperative of understanding Ukraine's status as a geopolitical flashpoint. Overall, the paper contributes to a nuanced comprehension of the evolving geopolitical landscape, its implications for regional stability, and international relations.

**Keywords:** Russia-Ukraine war, Ukraine's independence, Putin's Russia, Central and Eastern European security.

**Streszczenie:** W tym zwięzłym artykule analizujemy złożone relacje między dynamiką Unii Europejskiej a interesami Rosji w Europie, akcentując korzyści, jakie Rosja dostrzega w osłabionej UE. Artykuł składa się z trzech części: pierwsza dotyczy upadku Związku Radzieckiego i jego wpływu na nowo niepodległe państwa, kształtujący się krajobraz geopolityczny. W kolejnej części przedstawiamy politykę zagraniczną Rosji prowadzącą do konfliktu z Ukrainą w 2022 roku, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem kluczowej roli Ukrainy jako geopolitycznego punktu zapalnego. Ostatnia część analizuje dynamikę wojny ro-

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syjsko-ukraińskiej, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem roli Unii Europejskiej w zakresie bezpieczeństwa. W artykule podjęto próbę zrozumienia ewoluującego krajobrazu geopolitycznego i jego konsekwencji dla stabilności regionalnej i stosunków międzynarodowych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** wojna Rosji z Ukrainą, niepodległość Ukrainy, Rosja Putina, bezpieczeństwo Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej

## Introduction

The assertion that, from the standpoint of Russian interests in Europe, a weakened European Union (EU) is advantageous underscores a salient consideration. A consensus among EU member states in their approach to Russia results in impediments to the realization of Russian policy objectives. Conversely, divergent opinions and internal discord within the EU provide fertile ground for Russia to advance its political agenda. Notably, the EU, in stark contrast to Russia, is composed of 27 independent states. Frequently, the composite nature of such a conglomerate hinders the EU's efficacy as a cohesive actor on the international stage. Hence, the adage articulated by Judy Dempsey merits contemplation: "a strong Europe means having a coherent and united foreign, security and defence policy. Europe lacks these three essential elements that would make Europe think and act strategically. Without them, Europe is weak. Europe has such a weak foreign, security and defence policy because the member states cannot agree on what these policies should mean in practice. These disagreements and the consequent weaknesses play into the hands of Russia. It has long been adept at playing off the member states against each other and exploiting the divisions<sup>1</sup>".

The primary objective of this concise paper is to examine the collapse of the Soviet Union and its ramifications for newly independent states, which is explored in greater detail in the initial section. Subsequently, the analysis shifts focus towards elucidating 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 war, with particular attention to the role played by the European Union in the realm of security.

1 J. Dempsey, *Does Russia divide Europe?*, "New Eastern Europe" 2015, no. 5, p. 23.

# 1. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and implications for newly independent states

Following the disintegration of the USSR, its constituent union republics underwent a profound transformation, emerging as independent states. The fifteen newly established countries faced formidable challenges related to socio-political and economic restructuring, along with the intricate process of geopolitical self-identification. Russia, being the largest among them, initially aligned itself with Western powers but subsequently embarked on a trajectory of contestation against the global hegemony of the United States. This shift was propelled by Russia's rejection of the post-Soviet region as an exclusive sphere of influence, leading to the cultivation of closer ties with sceptical actors such as China, India, and Iran.

Concurrently, Russia accepted the departure of the Baltic states – Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia – towards Western integration. However, it vehemently opposed similar aspirations by Ukraine, Belarus, and Georgia. Ukrainian society, as noted earlier, demonstrated a resolute determination to distance itself from Russian-led initiatives for the reintegration of the post-Soviet space. This determination, evident during subsequent pro-Western revolutions, guided Ukraine towards gradual integration with Western institutions.

A watershed moment occurred in August 2008 when Russia militarily intervened in Georgia, unequivocally showcasing its capability to safeguard geopolitical interests. Subsequently, in February 2014, following the Western-backed Ukrainian Euromaidan revolution and the removal of Kremlin-supported authorities, Russia annexed Crimea. Russia also provided support to pro-Russian separatists in Donbas, escalating to a full-scale conventional armed aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. Ukrainians, aided by military and economic support from Western nations, displayed heroic and effective resistance against Russian forces, raising the prospect of reclaiming territories under Russian control.

However, the ultimate outcome of the conflict in Ukraine remains uncertain. Nonetheless, it is poised to exert a profound influence on the reconfiguration of the international system, even if it does not escalate into a broader conflict involving multiple countries. The United States reinforces its dominance in western Eurasia, while NATO expands its membership to include additional countries, such as Finland

and Sweden. Europe confronts the imperative to redefine its relationships with Russia and the USA, necessitating a reassessment of security policies in both the military and energy sectors. Simultaneously, the significance and prestige of China, a contender for superpower status, continue to ascend, presenting a sustained global challenge to American supremacy. India, too, experiences dynamic growth, further contributing to the complexity of the evolving international system. The world appears to be entering a transitional era, oscillating between monocentrism, characterized by the hegemony of a singular power centre, and polycentrism, where multiple powers dominate, albeit not necessarily on equal footing.

## 2. Ukraine's geopolitical position

The geopolitical landscape of the 21st century is characterized by the intricacies and profound consequences stemming from Ukraine's pivotal role as a geopolitical flashpoint, as noted by Zbigniew Brzezinski<sup>2</sup>. Its historical significance as a linchpin of the Soviet Union, serving as a formidable adversary to the United States during the Cold War, places Ukraine at the epicentre of global power dynamics. Ranked second only to Russia among the fifteen Soviet republics, Ukraine played a critical role in the union's agricultural production, defence industries, and military capabilities, including the Black Sea Fleet and a segment of the nuclear arsenal. The seismic decision to sever ties with the Soviet Union in 1991 constituted a decisive blow to the ailing superpower, marking an irrevocable schism.

Over the three subsequent decades of independence, Ukraine embarked on a trajectory seeking sovereignty, aiming to chart its own course while concurrently pursuing alignment with Western institutions such as the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). However, this odyssey has been fraught with challenges as Kyiv grappled with the intricacies of managing foreign relations and mitigating profound internal divisions. The dichotomy between a predominantly nationalist, Ukrainian-speaking population

2 See Z. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American primacy and its geostrategic imperatives*, Basic Books, New York 2016.

in the western regions advocating for increased integration with Europe, and a predominantly Russian-speaking community in the east favouring closer ties with Russia, underscores the internal tensions shaping Ukraine's trajectory.

The year 2014 emerged as a pivotal juncture, thrusting Ukraine into the international limelight as Russia annexed Crimea and became involved in arming and supporting separatists in the Donbas region. The annexation of Crimea marked the first occurrence since World War II wherein a European state annexed the territory of another, precipitating a seismic shift in geopolitical dynamics. The ensuing hostilities in the Donbas, spanning from 2014 to 2021, resulted in over fourteen thousand casualties, signifying the bloodiest conflict in Europe since the Balkan Wars of the 1990s. This protracted conflict elucidated a discernible shift in the global security landscape, transitioning from a unipolar epoch dominated by U.S. influence to a period characterized by renewed competition among great powers.

The stakes ascended dramatically in February 2022, as Russia initiated a full-scale invasion of Ukraine with the explicit aim of toppling the Western-aligned government led by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. This marked escalation underscores the imperative of comprehending Ukraine's status as a geopolitical flashpoint, encapsulating not only historical legacies but also contemporary manifestations of heightened global power competition and their profound implications for regional stability and international relations.

### **3. Russia's foreign policy prior to full-scale war with Ukraine since 2022**

Andrei Tsygankov posits that the global landscape within which Russia sought to safeguard its interests has undergone a significant transformation. The Western world's efficacy in formulating and shaping the international order encountered challenges on two fronts. Firstly, the Russo-Georgian War of August 2008 disrupted the hegemony previously enjoyed by the United States and Europe in employing military force as a tool in global political affairs. Secondly, the global financial crisis brought to light a substantial vulnerability within the Western

economic framework<sup>3</sup>. 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 a significant impact upon Russia's foreign policies<sup>4</sup>. The relationship 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 a neo-revisionist policy, which resulted in the confrontation in Ukraine<sup>5</sup>. 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 the 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 the realisation of its strategic objectives<sup>6</sup>.

According to Sakwa, neo-revisionism does not entail a wholesale dismantling of the existing international order; rather, it signifies a paradigm wherein all major powers are compelled to adhere to established international norms and acknowledge Russia as an equal participant within the system<sup>7</sup>. On the other hand, Lilia Shevtsova believes that Russia's anti-West policy is determined by several external factors: 1) the naivety of the West (a popular belief that support for Boris Yeltsin would contribute to Russia's democratisation); 2) coop-

3 A.P. Tsygankov, *Russia's foreign policy. Change and continuity in national identity*, 2nd ed., Lanham 2010, p. 201; see also S.M. Walt, *Liberal illusions caused the Ukraine crisis*, "Foreign Policy" 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/19/ukraine-russia-nato-crisis-liberal-illusions/> [10.10.2023]; J.J. Mearsheimer, *Why the West is principally responsible for the Ukrainian crisis*, "Economist" 2022, <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2022/03/11/john-mearsheimer-on-why-the-west-is-principally-responsible-for-the-ukrainian-crisis> [12.10.2023].

4 A.P. Tsygankov, op. cit., p. 201.

5 R. Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine. Crisis in the borderlands*, London–New York 2015, p. 30.

6 *Ibid.*, pp. 31–34.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

eration 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 the past 20 years); 3) Russia's failure to make use of the opportunities that emerged after the defeat in the Cold War, and to transform into a state under the rule of the law<sup>8</sup>. Adam D. Rotfeld describes Russia's new strategy in different terms. He observes that the 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"<sup>9</sup>.

## 4. The roots of resentment: NATO expansion and Russian perception, and Putin's fears and strategic calculations

In the intricate tapestry of international relations, the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia stands as a pivotal moment, necessitating a thorough examination of the underlying causes propelling such significant geopolitical shifts. Western analysts posit that the invasion can be interpreted as the culmination of a growing resentment harboured by the Kremlin toward NATO's post-Cold War expansion into what was once considered the Soviet sphere of influence.

Russian leaders, prominently President Vladimir Putin, articulate a narrative of broken promises and perceived violations dating back to the early 1990s<sup>10</sup>. According to this perspective, the United States and NATO allegedly failed to uphold commitments made during this transformative period, explicitly vowing not to extend the alliance into the former Soviet bloc. The Kremlin perceives NATO's enlargement during this tumultuous era as an affront, a humiliating imposition that unfolded while Russia could do little but observe.

8 L. Szewcowa, *Polem gry Kremla jest chaos*, trans. A. Ehrlich, "Gazeta Wyborcza/Magazyn Świąteczny", 27 June 2015, [http://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/1,145325,18248326,Polem\\_gry\\_Kremla\\_jest\\_chaos.html#TRwkd](http://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/1,145325,18248326,Polem_gry_Kremla_jest_chaos.html#TRwkd) [22.01.2023].

9 A.D. Rotfeld, *Porządek międzynarodowy. Parametry zmiany*, "Sprawy Międzynarodowe" 2014, vol. 67, no. 4, p. 35.

10 See K. Liik, *War of obsession: Why Putin is risking Russia's future*, "European Council on Foreign Relations" 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/article/war-of-obsession-why-putin-is-risking-russias-future/> [20.11.2023].

Moreover, some analysts highlight NATO's expansion as the primary motivator for Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. However, others posit that President Putin's apprehensions about the trajectory of Ukrainian development played a pivotal role. Historian Anne Applebaum, adds that Putin's motivations extend beyond territorial concerns. She suggests that Putin aims to destabilize Ukraine, fostering an environment of fear and uncertainty. Applebaum outlines the objective as undermining Ukrainian democracy, precipitating economic collapse, prompting the withdrawal of foreign investors, and instilling doubts about the viability of democracy in neighbouring countries.

To comprehensively understand the multifaceted motivations behind Russia's invasion, it is imperative to delve into the complexities of Putin's strategic calculations and the broader geopolitical landscape. Putin's actions are intertwined with his vision for a Russia-led sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, shedding light on the intricate interplay between historical grievances, territorial ambitions, and strategic calculations. This comprehensive perspective is crucial for unravelling the layers of complexity inherent in the events leading up to the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

## **5. 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<sup>11</sup>. 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<sup>12</sup>. The fall of

11 See I. Krastev, *How to avoid Europe's disintegration*, "New Eastern Europe" 2015, no. 5, p. 8; also F. Schimmelfennig, D. Leuffen, B. Rittberger, *The European Union as a system of differentiated integration: interdependence, politicization and differentiation*, "Journal of European Public Policy" 2015, vol. 22(6); D. Webber, *How likely is it that the European Union will disintegrate? A critical analysis of competing theoretical perspectives*, "European Journal of International Relations" 2014, vol. 20(2).

12 A.D. Rotfeld, *Porządek międzynarodowy...*, p. 47.

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 *russkiy mir*, i.e. “the Russian world”, may serve as an example of such a “new game without rules”<sup>13</sup>.

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 reflected in the rivalry between two external entities over Ukraine – the West (the USA and the EU) and Russia<sup>14</sup>. 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<sup>15</sup>.

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,

13 Ibid., p. 46.

14 See R. Zięba, *Międzynarodowe implikacje kryzysu ukraińskiego*, “Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations” 2014, vol. 50, no 2, p. 15.

15 A. Umland, *The global impact of the “Ukraine Crisis”*, *Russia's decline and Euro-Asiatic security in the early 21st century*, “Krytyka Magazine”, June 2015, <http://krytyka.com/en/articles/global-impact-ukraine-crisis-russias-decline-and-euro-asiatic-security-early-21st-century#sthash.ufE1B3S9.dpuf> [10.01.2023].

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<sup>16</sup>.

### **In lieu of conclusions**

During the Russia-Ukraine war, the European Union adopted a comprehensive and multifaceted approach towards its Eastern Policy, which aimed to address the conflict and support Ukraine while managing its relations with Russia. The EU's response can be summarized as follows:

- **Sanctions on Russia:** 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 defence, and were periodically renewed and expanded upon in coordination with the United States and other Western allies.
- **Support for Ukraine:** The EU provided extensive financial and technical assistance to Ukraine to strengthen its democratic institutions, promote economic reforms, and support its territorial

16 T. Stępniewski, *Geopolityka regionu Morza Czarnego w pozimnowojennym świecie*, Lublin–Warsaw 2011, pp. 295-320.

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.

- **Diplomatic efforts:** 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, which involved Ukraine, Russia, Germany, and France, and aimed 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.
- **Energy diversification:** 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.
- **Military cooperation and security assistance:** The EU provided support for Ukraine's defence 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.

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, and security 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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