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Russia's geopolitical ambitions and the shadow of genocide in Ukraine

Ambicje geopolityczne Rosji i cień ludobójstwa na Ukrainie

Abstract: This concise paper examines Russia's aggression towards Ukraine and its implications for Western democracies. Divided into four sections – The Importance of Ukraine for the International Position of the Russian Federation, The Context of Russia's Relations with the European Union, The Russian Federation's Revisionism in the International Arena, and Genocide as an Element of Russia's Imperial Policy – the analysis highlights the ongoing full-scale war between Russia and Ukraine, which has escalated in the past two years as part of a decade of Kremlin-driven aggression. This conflict reflects Vladimir Putin's ambition to restore Russian imperial influence, focusing on regaining control over its periphery in Eastern Europe through military intervention. The paper argues that Russia's actions threaten not only Ukraine but also European stability and democracy. Integrating Ukraine into the European Union is identified as essential for enhancing regional security and countering Russian expansionism. By addressing Russia's imperialistic goals and emphasising the need to support Ukraine, this paper calls for a unified Western response to safeguard a secure and democratic Europe.

Keywords: Russia-Ukraine war, Putin's Russia, Central and Eastern European security, Genocide in Ukraine

Streszczenie: W tym zwięzłym artykule badana jest agresja Rosji wobec Ukrainy i jej implikacje dla zachodnich demokracji. Podzielony na trzy sekcje – znaczenie Ukrainy dla międzynarodowej pozycji Federacji Rosyjskiej, kontekst stosunków Rosji z Unią Europejską, rewizjonizm Federacji Rosyjskiej na arenie międzynarodowej oraz ludobójstwo jako element imperialnej polityki Rosji – artykuł podkreśla trwającą na pełną skalę wojnę między Rosją a Ukrainą, która nasiliła się w ciągu ostatnich dwóch lat w ramach dekady agresji napędzanej przez Kreml. Konflikt ten odzwierciedla ambicje Władimira Putina, aby przywrócić rosyjskie wpływy imperialne, skupiając się na odzyskaniu kontroli nad peryferiami w Europie Wschodniej poprzez interwencję militarną. Artykuł dowodzi, że działania Rosji zagrażają nie tylko Ukrainie, ale także europejskiej stabilności

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i demokracji. Integracja Ukrainy z Unią Europejską jest uznawana za niezbędną dla zwiększenia bezpieczeństwa regionalnego i przeciwdziałania rosyjskiemu ekspansjonizmowi. Odnosząc się do imperialistycznych celów Rosji i podkreślając potrzebę wsparcia Ukrainy, artykuł wzywa do zjednoczonej odpowiedzi Zachodu w celu zabezpieczenia bezpiecznej i demokratycznej Europy.

Słowa kluczowe: wojna Rosji z Ukrainą, Rosja Putina, bezpieczeństwo Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej, ludobójstwo na Ukrainie

Introduction

The ongoing full-scale war between Russia and Ukraine, which has persisted for over two years as part of a decade of Kremlin-driven aggression, can be analysed through the lenses of both geopolitics and the bilateral relationship between Moscow and Kyiv. Ukraine, viewed as subordinate to Russia, plays a pivotal role in Vladimir Putin's ambition to restore the Russian Empire. This goal is pursued with the justification provided by Russian authorities, often through acts of violence against the Ukrainian people, including actions that can be classified as genocide.

1. The importance of Ukraine for the international position of the Russian Federation

A core objective of Russia's geostrategy under Vladimir Putin is to re-establish influence over its periphery, lost following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. When examining Russia's policies towards Eastern Europe, it is essential to recognise that, despite the more than 30 years since the collapse of the USSR, Russia continues to seek a dominant position in Eastern Europe and, more broadly, within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). To achieve this, Russia employs a range of methods, including military intervention, as evidenced by the Russian-Georgian war in 2008 and the ongoing conflict with Ukraine since 2014.

The key strategic goal remains the reintegration of the post-Soviet space and the consolidation of Russia's leadership in the region. Achieving such dominance would allow Russia to exert exclusive control over this area, positioning itself as a global superpower and one of the primary poles of influence in the envisioned multipolar world order. In this context, Eastern Europe represents a critical zone for Russian operations – a historical area of vital interests and exclusive influence. This region is central to the Kremlin's reintegration policies, designed to solidify its presence and control.

Russia's interpretation of "integration", however, differs significantly from that of Western powers. For Russia, integration entails the complete restoration of its dominance over the CIS region, accompanied by the deepening of strategic dependence among post-Soviet states, particularly in terms of economic and security matters. This is in stark contrast to the European Union's model of integration, which is characterised by bottom-up cooperation, shared values, voluntary membership, and mutual benefits. Russia's approach, by contrast, emphasises hierarchical control and enforced dependence.

The prioritisation of the post-Soviet space in Russia's foreign policy is driven not only by geopolitical concerns but also by cultural and historical factors, shared security interests, economic ties, and the perceived need to protect the Russian diaspora. Additionally, prestige is a significant factor in Russia's foreign policy calculus, as it strives to position itself as a bridge between Asia and Europe. Eastern Europe, particularly Ukraine and Belarus, plays a fundamental role in Russia's self-identity. These countries, which form a natural boundary between East and West, are seen as essential to Russia's status as a superpower. From Russia's perspective, Ukraine and Belarus are integral components of Greater Russia, united by linguistic, ethnocultural, and historical bonds. Consequently, the Kremlin views the independence of these states as a temporary anomaly rather than a permanent condition.

Russia's geopolitical ambitions, as exemplified by its actions towards Ukraine and the broader Eastern European region, are deeply rooted in its historical vision of empire and dominance. Ukraine's significance to Russia extends beyond mere geopolitical strategy; it touches on Russia's cultural identity and its self-perception as a great power. The current conflict between Russia and Ukraine, therefore, is not only a struggle over territory but also a battle over the meaning of sovereignty and national identity in the post-Soviet space. Russia's actions, including potential acts of genocide, underscore the dark shadows that hover over its ambitions to reshape the region and reassert its influence on the global stage.

2. The context of Russia's relations with the European Union

Russia's relations with the European Union are heavily influenced by great-power rhetoric and a clear preference for engaging with large

and influential EU member states, such as Germany, France, and Italy, while largely disregarding other members, particularly those from the former Eastern Bloc and the Baltic states. This dismissive and often hostile attitude extends to the integration aspirations of Eastern European countries, especially Ukraine.

By maintaining agreements with key European powers, Russia has effectively exploited internal divisions within the EU, using them as tools for political influence. Additionally, EU-Russia relations are marked by elements of rivalry. The conflict of interests between the European Union – expanding politically and increasing its global involvement – and Russia, which seeks to maintain its former sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, exemplifies this tension.

This complex and ambivalent state of relations has significantly hindered effective cooperation between Russia and the EU. The relationship remains in a state of suspension (notably through sanctions) as a result of Russia's annexation of Crimea and the ongoing conflict in Donbas since 2014.

3. The Russian Federation's revisionism in the international arena

The collapse of the bipolar world order has given rise to a new type of global system. As Adam D. Rotfeld notes, power in international relations is now dispersed and polycentric¹. However, the rules and norms established in the past reflect an international reality that no longer exists, corresponding to a bygone era. These norms and rules require adaptation to the current international landscape, shaped by the emergence of new great powers. This has created a kind of “vacuum” that rising powers, including Russia, are attempting to exploit.

Russia is currently trying to unilaterally impose new rules of the game on the global stage. A notable example of this was the Kremlin's proposals for two new treaties with the United States and NATO in December 2021, which were rejected by the West. Through these proposals, Russia sought to codify its “natural zone of influence” in international law, demanding that NATO not only cease its eastward expansion

1 A.D. Rotfeld, *Porządek międzynarodowy. Parametry zmiany*, “Sprawy Międzynarodowe” 2014, vol. 67, no. 4, p. 47.

but also divide its members into “old” and “new”, effectively relegating Central and Eastern European countries like Poland to secondary status. While Russia invoked the framework of international law in these efforts, it did so for purely instrumental purposes, treating international law as a set of procedural solutions devoid of any deeper axiological or meaningful content.

Russia's imposition of a “new game without rules” can be exemplified by its attempt to subordinate Ukraine to the principles of the *Russkiy mir* (the “Russian world”). The Euromaidan protests in Ukraine, also known as the Revolution of Dignity, began in the fall of 2013 and triggered significant geopolitical shifts in Eastern Europe. These events eventually led to the outbreak of armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine. However, to fully understand the roots of the Ukrainian crisis, it is essential to examine the evolution of Russia's foreign policy and its changing perception of international relations in recent years².

Richard Sakwa notes that Russia's foreign policy has become increasingly revisionist, resulting in confrontation, particularly in Ukraine. By 2023, this confrontation has evolved into a broader conflict between Russia, the United States, and the West. According to Sakwa, several key factors have contributed to Russia's shift towards revisionism. First, the gradual deterioration of relations with the European Union played a significant role. Second, the breakdown of the pan-European security framework, which had previously enabled Russia to cooperate with the West as an autonomous partner, marked a crucial turning point. Third, Russia, along with other rising powers like China, began to challenge America's claims to “exceptionalism” and global leadership. Finally, Western promotion of “democracy” – often seen by Russia as a cover for advancing strategic objectives – became another catalyst for Russian revisionism³.

2 More: T. Ash et al., *How to End Russia's War on Ukraine: Safeguarding Europe's Future, and the Dangers of a False Peace*, London 2023, DOI: 10.55317/9781784135782; N. Bernsand, B. Törnquist-Plewa (eds.), *Cultural and political imaginaries in Putin's Russia*, Leiden–Boston 2019; S. Everts, *Navigate a power political world*, The European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2024, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/navigating-power-political-world> [28.08.2024]; T. Frye, *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia*, Princeton 2021; E. Götz, J. Staun, *Why Russia attacked Ukraine: Strategic culture and radicalized narratives*, “Contemporary Security Policy” 2022, vol. 43, no. 3, pp. 482–497; P. Kolsto, H. Blakkisrud (eds.), *Russia Before and After Crimea: Nationalism and Identity, 2010–17*, Edinburgh 2018.

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

Sakwa argues that Russia perceives Western democracy promotion as a tool for the West to pursue its own geopolitical goals, further widening the rift between Russia and the European Union, particularly in Eastern Europe. This rivalry encompasses issues such as the competition for influence in the EU's eastern neighbourhood, energy security, economic cooperation, and differing approaches to democracy, human rights, and civil liberties⁴.

In this context, Ukraine has become a central battleground in the broader geopolitical struggle between great powers for the future balance of power in Eastern Europe. A key question arises: Has Russia's revisionism, alongside other rising powers like China, through conflicts such as those in Ukraine and Syria, Gaza, initiated a shift towards of a post-unipolar international order? This inquiry raises profound implications for the future of global geopolitics.

4 • Genocide as an element of Russia's imperial policy

Russia's approach to international law, shaped by its geopolitical ambitions, is deeply rooted in its long-standing imperial policy, which dates back to the Tsarist era and was further refined during the Soviet period. Russia perceives itself as an "imperial subject of international law", reserving full sovereignty and the ability to act freely on the global stage for states of its stature. In contrast, smaller nations are relegated to mere elements within Russia's "natural sphere of influence" and, should they deviate from this status, can expect punitive measures. This approach was especially evident under the leadership of Joseph Stalin, where, despite the formal federal structure of the Soviet Union, individual republics were treated as internal colonies under Moscow's control.

Historian Nikolai Ivanov's analysis suggests that this dynamic was central to the genocidal policies of the Stalinist era, exacerbated by Stalin's personal prejudices, or even hatred, towards various nationalities within the USSR, including Ukrainians and Poles. These factors contributed to mass crimes such as the Great Famine (Holodomor) in Soviet Ukraine from 1932–1933 and the so-called "Polish Opera-

4 Ibid., pp. 31–34.

tion”, carried out by the NKVD in 1937–1938. Today, these events are widely considered deliberate acts of genocide⁵.

Genocide, in this context, is not limited to the physical extermination of individuals based solely on their Ukrainian identity, as seen in places like Izium or Mariupol, but also encompasses psychological and cultural destruction. This includes widespread cases of rape as a tool of psychological warfare and the mass deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia, where they are indoctrinated with the principles of Russian imperialism. These forms of violence exemplify genocide in physical, psychological, and biological dimensions, as recognised by international law.

The recent resolution by the International Criminal Court in The Hague, which issued an arrest warrant for President Vladimir Putin, among others, for the systematic abduction of Ukrainian children, further highlights this criminal policy. While initially classified as a war crime, this charge may evolve based on emerging evidence, reflecting the highest levels of Kremlin involvement in orchestrating violence against Ukrainians.

Conclusions

The brutal war that Putin's Russia has waged against Ukraine for the past decade – escalating to full-scale conflict over the last two years – represents far more than just the whim of a Kremlin leader. It reflects a strategic desire to go down in history as another Russian or Soviet leader who “reclaims” so-called historical lands within Moscow's “natural sphere of influence”, aiming to restore the Russian Federation to superpower status and reshape the global geopolitical order. In this context, the crimes committed, particularly acts of genocide, serve as tools for rebuilding and maintaining an empire in the name of the *Russkiy mir* (Russian World), akin to Russian nativism during the Tsarist era or the concept of *Homo Sovieticus* during Soviet times. From this perspective, an independent Ukraine with a strong national identity is seen as a significant obstacle to Moscow's ambitions.

5 More: T. Lachowski, T. Stępniewski, *Russia's War on Ukraine: Geopolitics, International Law, and Genocide*, Prace IES, no. 10, Lublin 2023.

Russia's aggression extends beyond Ukraine; it represents a wider assault on the principles of Western democracy. If unchecked, this threat could spill over into other European nations, creating a domino effect of instability and conflict. As articulated by Polyakova et al., "Russia must be seen for what it truly is: an imperialistic, authoritarian regime that aims to destroy the international order and establish a sphere of influence. It must be contained"⁶. The aspiration for a secure and prosperous Europe hangs in the balance, contingent upon the West's willingness to confront Russian expansionism head-on.

While sanctions against Russia are a necessary measure, they have arrived too late to prevent the current conflict. Supporting Ukraine in its struggle now is crucial to thwarting future conflicts in Europe, yet it cannot reverse the devastation already inflicted.

It is a misconception to believe that Europe can sidestep a confrontation with Russia. The Kremlin views its actions not merely as a conflict with Ukraine but as a broader war against NATO and the West. Therefore, should Ukraine fall, it would signify a loss for the West as a whole, with Europe facing the most severe repercussions.

The West must resist the intimidation of Putin's threats, including his nuclear posturing. A robust security architecture for Europe cannot be established without the integration of Ukraine and other "grey area" nations into the European Union. Ukraine's security is inextricably linked to that of Europe, underscoring the urgent need to modernise NATO's defence strategies and maintain a permanent presence on its eastern flank⁷.

The vision for a secure Europe is rooted in a clear commitment to a democratic, sovereign Ukraine that is fully integrated into the European Union. This integration represents a far greater threat to Putin's regime than NATO membership alone, as it would enable Ukraine to reinforce its identity as a stable and consolidated democracy. The stakes are high, and the path forward must be one of unity and resolve.

6 A. Polyakova et al., *A New Vision for the Transatlantic Alliance: The Future of European Security, the United States, and the World Order after Russia's War in Ukraine*, 30 November 2023, <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/a-new-vision-for-the-transatlantic-alliance-the-future-of-european-security-the-united-states-and-the-world-order-after-russias-war-in-ukraine/> [23.07.2024].

7 More: D.P. Jankowski, T. Stepniewski (eds.), *The 2024 NATO Summit: Priorities for Transatlantic Security*, IES Policy Papers, no. 1, Lublin 2024.

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