

Geopolitical challenges for the post-bipolar Europe

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Abstract

In the context of the crisis in Ukraine and over Ukraine that has brought the Russia-West relations to a breaking point for the first time since the end of the East-West confrontation, it comes as no surprise that people are now asking themselves if we are heading towards a new Cold War. The Ukrainian crisis is viewed as the first direct conflict between differing regional strategies of Russia and the EU – Brussels' Eastern partnership and Moscow's Eurasia Union concept. Ukraine has been central to both strategies, and "the either/or" choice presented to Kiev ultimately made a conflict inevitable. However, the reason for this confrontation goes much deeper than the clash of two opposing regional strategies and is rooted heavily in the 1990s. Therefore, the Ukrainian conflict should be viewed as the quintessence of the mutual disappointment of Russia and the West, resulted from their mistakes after the end of bipolarity.

Keywords: Cold war, European integration, European security, Eastern partnership, NATO's enlargement

1. Introduction

The crisis in the Russia–West relations stems from the profound misunderstanding of each other's views regarding acceptable foundations of European security and stakes across the post-Soviet space. There were continuous (albeit open-ended) debates on the former: Moscow was against European security built on the EU and NATO, in which Russia had no direct influence on policy-making. But post-Soviet space was never discussed openly and sincerely during the post-Cold War era. These contradictions are still casting a long shadow over Russia's foreign policy. The Caucasus conflict of 2008 was a creation of the Russia-NATO/US differences over the security arrangements in the post-bipolar Europe, while the conflict over Ukraine smashed to pieces the West-Russia "strategic partnership" based on four common spaces of co-operation because none of these spaces addressed the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)

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issue. It is possible to identify crucial turning points in the history of this conflict: President Yanukovich's shift from what had seemed Ukraine's European vocation on the eve of the EU's Vilnius summit, along with a Russian departure from Europe that was formalised by Vladimir Putin's return in 2012 to the power of the presidency. Deeper analysis still shows that the origins of the conflict are in fact heavily rooted in the 1990s.

2. The roots of the Russia-West confrontation

Typically, large-scale wars in Europe ended with a peace conference, such as the Peace of Westphalia or Yalta, both of which established a new order and new rules of behaviour in international relations. But the end of the Cold War did not lead to a new system of European security to fill the void. The collapse of the "Eastern bloc" convinced the West that nothing needed to be changed, although the 1990s demonstrated convincingly that the challenges to European security had changed dramatically and the new problems could not be solved on the basis of the old system. The West greatly underestimates its own role in events within and around Russia after the collapse of the USSR. Russia's Western partners have never fully understood the reverse link between Russia's internal evolution and its international environment. The better the relations and the greater the cooperation in the fields of economics, politics, security, humanitarian questions, and culture, the more solid the position of democratic forces within Russia will be, the more the public will come to embrace democratic freedoms, and the more attention will the authorities at every level pay to observing democratic norms and procedures. Although the West still singles out the 90's as the most favourable period in the Russia-West relations, the main problems are rooted there. Three factors are essential for understanding the origins of this crisis.

2.1. Division in the post-Communist space

After the end of bipolarity, the post-Communist world was divided between two security institutions – NATO and OSCE. The former became responsible for the Central and Eastern Europe, the latter – for the post-Soviet space. This division compromised the OSCE role having it presented as a second-rate institution for second-rate countries. After the collapse of the USSR, nobody in the West wanted to sort out the mess in the post-Soviet space, but Russia simply could not stand aloof. In many senses, Russia's policy on the CIS was uneven and heavy-handed, however, Russia stabilized the post-Soviet space as it could, and once it was more or less stabilized, NATO and the EU turned their heels to the CIS region.

2.2. Bypassing Russia

The regional strategies of NATO and EU had one common characteristic – they were unavoidably bypassing Russia. Once the problem with the Soviet nuclear legacy solved, the EU, as well as the whole of the West, became preoccupied with the prospect of a new Russian empire revival. Therefore, it perceived the disintegration trends from the CIS as a key condition of democratization of the Newly Independent States (NIS) and a guarantee that the USSR would never be brought back to life, in whatever form, in the post-Soviet space. The Brussels strategy vis-à-vis the post-Soviet space has been further developed within the framework of the EU Neighbourhood Policy, a policy directed at the stabilisation of the Union's immediate neighbourhood. In the first draft ("Communication on Wider Europe"), which was criticised in Russian political and academic circles, the EU neighbourhood was regarded as one integral whole which had a striking resemblance to the Yeltsin policy on the so-called near abroad in early 90s.¹ The Commission's Communication on Wider Europe did not contain any clear criteria of geographic, historical, political and economic factors designating Europe's borders or Europe's "nearest and near abroad". Like in Solana's paper on EU security, Russia was mentioned "en passant" together with the EU Mediterranean partners. That approach could but confirm suspicions that the Union's policy on Russia lacked a clear strategic vision, above all the degrees to which Russia could be integrated into the widening and deepening European Union.

The Eastern Partnership initiative of the EU was launched before the Caucasus crisis as a reaction to the deficits of the EU Neighbourhood Policy, as a manifestation of the EU dissatisfaction with the orange revolutions in the CIS and tacit recognition of the GUAM inefficiency. But its implementation was enhanced by the consequences of the Caucasus crisis as well as by the gas crisis between Russia and Ukraine. The Prague summit declaration makes it quite clear that the Eastern Partnership is a new more pragmatic version of the ENP putting pragmatism above ideals. It has been stressed that this initiative is not directed against Russia. But as long as Russia shares the continent with the EU and NATO, which possess huge economic, technological and military power - "without Russia" will always be interpreted by Moscow as "against Russia". Russia has not yet found its proper place in the post-bipolar Europe and being neither an ally, nor

¹ Even after the collapse of the USSR, the Yeltsin leadership continued to regard Russia's immediate neighbourhood as one integral space without reassessment of new priorities and Russia's key-partners in this area and without understanding the impact of regionalisation on the FSU countries. This typical Soviet approach resulted in Russia's failure in the CIS and lately the emphasis has been put on the bilateral relations.

an opponent to the West, it will be searching for its own allies. The very idea to launch such an initiative without participation of the EU biggest Eastern partner raised Russia's suspicions against its real goals. Had Russia been included in these negotiations from the very beginning, a critical position would never have developed.

Russia has been concerned about EU plans to create its own sphere of influence in the CIS space. It was fearful that it would be deprived of its status of priority partner for the CIS neighbours. The EU Eastern Partnership was viewed as an alternative to Russia's integrationist plans in the region, namely to the Eurasian Economic Union (Alexandrova-Arbatova, 2012, pp.1-5). The cracks in Wider Europe can but confirm that, in the situation of confrontation, neither the EU, nor Russia can be transformative powers in a positive sense. And last but not least, Russia had security concerns, although EaP was not aimed at security cooperation. Brussels' invitation to Belarus and Armenia to join the Eastern Partnership looked like an attempt by the EU to neutralize the anti-Russian vector of the project. Without them, the Eastern Partnership would be limited to the GUAM countries, a group set up to counter Russian policy in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Yet the involvement of Russia's allies not only highlighted the blatant artificiality of the EaP format but reinforced Moscow's concerns about the EU attempts to squeeze Russia out of its habitat.

2.3. New precedents

The Kosovo precedent made the likely inevitable. Within two decades since the Paris Charter Summit, every one of the ten principles of the CSCE's Helsinki Final Act (1975) has been violated. Two conflicts after the end of bipolarity – the Kosovo crisis of 1999 and the Caucasus crisis of 2008 are the most telling evidence to this reality. The Helsinki principles were not legally binding rules but nobody could even think about violating them since the stakes in the bipolar world were very high. In the post-bipolar time international actors started to apply these principles selectively according to their foreign policy interests and preferences. The West said that Kosovo could not serve as an example for Russia to recognize South Ossetia or Abkhazia. Kosovo President Fatmir Sejdiu, whose position was supported by the EU and NATO said “We have always stressed that Kosovo has special characteristics; that it is *sui generis* and it cannot be used as a precedent for other conflict zones, areas or regions” (BalkanInsight, 2008). However, notwithstanding the economic, political, cultural and ethnic peculiarities of the frozen conflicts as well as their varying geopolitical locations and environments, they share some fundamental features: the bitterness of the dominant titular ethnic group about losing to the separatists as a result of the intervention of an external force, the factor of refugees (except, Transnistria), the loss of the territorial integrity.

In this connection, the question arises: has the order of priority of these principles shifted? The disintegration of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union showed that the most immediate threat to peace in Europe comes less from an act of aggression than from the separation of ethnic minorities, sufficiently numerous to demand autonomy, which in turn could (and did) lead to conflicts. If the principle of countries' territorial integrity still retains its former value, then how are we to deal with the precedents of Kosovo, South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Crimea? Are they exceptions to the rule established by the Helsinki Act? And under what conditions do national minorities have the right to self-determination? It is evident that a policy of genocide by a titular nation against a national minority and mass violations of human rights can provide grounds for independence. However, the question of who will be the arbiter of such disputes and impartially determine the facts of genocide and human rights violations, free of double standards, is far from trivial. And another question arises: Do oppressed nations have the right to seek independence by force and, if so, under what conditions? If nations have the right to seek independence peacefully, should a time frame be set for the achievement of this goal? The second unanswered question is related to the post-bipolar contradiction between the right of nations to sovereignty and non-interference of external forces in their internal affairs and the right of nations to humanitarian intervention. When, in 1999, NATO countries cited the humanitarian catastrophe in Kosovo as a justification for their military intervention against Yugoslavia, not even for a moment did they imagine that someone else might apply the same principle. The conflict in South Ossetia showed that it was possible. The declared goal of the operation by coalition forces in Libya in 2011 was to "ensure a no-fly zone" and to "protect civilians" from Gaddafi's forces. Unfortunately, the Libyan campaign plunged the country into total chaos and discredited the very idea of humanitarian operations. It is worth noting that UN-sanctioned humanitarian interventions in their purest form have been few and far between. However, the aim of peacekeeping operations, peace enforcement, and the preventive deployment of peacekeepers is to avert humanitarian catastrophes (mass violations of human rights, genocide, ethnic cleansing, civil war, natural disasters and calamities). Russia explained its actions in Crimea as preventing a humanitarian catastrophe. The main question in the debate on humanitarian intervention seems to be who should define (and how) the parameters of a humanitarian catastrophe, the decision-making procedure for intervention, and the mechanism of military involvement to prevent it. Clearly, only the UN Security Council, acting in accordance with the UN Charter, could be conferred with such powers. However, the U.S. has repeatedly taken unilateral decisions on humanitarian intervention, forming the so-called "coalitions of the willing" from among its allies. The third challenge is the contradiction between the right of nations to freely choose the organizations that ensure their security, Helsinki principle I, and the right of nations to organize security arrangements on their

territories in line with perceived threats to national security. In both the conflict in Georgia and the current crisis in Ukraine, this contradiction played no minor role. The post-bipolar architecture of European security is a chaotic jumble of old and new institutions, with no clear dividing line between them in terms of roles and functions, which presupposes competition between institutions and partners, and leads not only to the paralysis of the entire system of security, but to the emergence of new conflicts. To break this vicious circle, Russia and the West must do what was not done in the post-Cold War period – to revisit the Helsinki principles and to adjust them to new realities.²

3. The European mirror has cracked

True, the Ukrainian conflict has brought the Russia-West relations to the edge of confrontation for the first time since the end of the Cold war. However, the EU soft power is challenged not only by the conflict in Ukraine. The EU is challenged by several crises – the consequences by the economic crisis that revealed some inherent flaws in the integrationist construct, the migration crisis, the crisis of democratic legitimacy and the crisis in the EU-Russia relations. Deep divides have appeared not only in the Russia-West relations but in the European space at large affecting relations between and within the countries of “old and new Europe” as well as the CIS region. The whole European space has cracked.

Interestingly enough, unlike the migration crisis, the EU-Russia confrontation does not present a threat to European integration as such, although it overburdens the EU political agenda and distracts the resources needed to cope with other urgent problems. The EU/West-Russia confrontation creates a threat to European security. The immediate military threat is related to the risk of unintended escalation: narrowly avoided mid-air collisions, close encounters at sea, and the danger of losing control over events. Another potential threat is the proliferation of conflicts in the Black Sea area.

3.1. New Europe versus Old Europe

Years ago, the U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld touched upon “the uncomfortable truth” in Europe, dividing the continent into what he called “old Europe”, namely France and Germany, and “new Europe” or real atlanticists from the CEE countries (US Department of Defense, 2003). According to Rumsfeld, the latter were more supportive to the ideas of democracy and protection of human rights. In the light of the current migration crisis in Europe, this statement looks

² Further explained in Nadia Alexandrova-Arbatova, Top 3 geopolitical challenges for Russia and NATO, *Russia Direct*, 10 April 2014, <http://www.russia-direct.org/analysis/top-3-geopolitical-challenges-russia-and-nato>.

at least debatable. But another consideration is more important here. The countries of Central and East Europe, not wanting to remain a buffer zone between Russia and the West, used all efforts and recourses to find security within the framework of NATO. However, in case of escalation of the Ukrainian conflict, precisely these countries risk to find themselves at a “front-line” with all predictable consequences.

Put simply, in the context of the Ukrainian conflict, it is getting clear that there is no unity between the CEE states. The Visegrad group is split. Three countries - the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary - have distanced themselves from Poland, being more cautious with regard to the Ukrainian question and more skeptical about the EU anti-Russian sanctions. The reason of this position lies not so much in their pro-Russian sentiments but rather in their Euroscepticism.

It should be noted that the dividing lines ran not only between the countries of the region but also within these countries, having highlighted the internal split between Euroskeptics and Europhiles, between “hard Euroscepticism” and “soft Euroscepticism”. Unlike brexiters, soft euroskeptics in the CEE countries do not have a principled objection to European integration or EU membership but they are in opposition to the EU’s current or future planned trajectory based on the further extension of competencies that the EU is planning to make (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2008).

However, the CEE countries proceed also from the interests of their national security, which is why they have a more balanced approach than Washington or Brussels to political processes in Ukraine. Poland and three Baltic states, located closer to Russian borders, view their neighbour in an increasingly negative light. No doubt, the divide within new Europe is a new reality which can do nothing but complicate the EU and NATO agendas.

Despite the complexity of the current situation, under the best scenario in the Russia-West relations, the CEE countries could become part of a broader space of cooperation in Eastern Europe which would include the CIS European states. It is exactly this part of Europe where it would be important to reinstate the institutes of confidence building measures, prevention of unintended military incidents and low intensity military activity.

3.2. Cracks in the Eastern Partnership region

The Ukrainian conflict has strongly affected the relationship between the architects of Eastern Partnership (EaP) and partner-states. The last Eastern Partnership summit in Riga, in 2015 has become evidence to this reality (Alexandrova-Arbatova, 2015). The summit was primarily symbolic. Its goal was to keep the project afloat and to show participating countries that Brussels has not lost interest in EaP.

However, the Riga summit exposed the flaws inherent in the Eastern Partnership since its concept lacks an ultimate goal for those countries that have embarked on the path of painful reforms. In many respects, the EU's position stems from its revised enlargement policy, in particular the introduction of a five-year moratorium on the acceptance of future members and recognition of the failure of the political elites of the three leading EaP countries to implement reform and tackle corruption. Put simply, Brussels is reluctant to add new problems to its agenda. And last but not least, the EU's caution is linked to an external factor. The past months since the Vilnius summit have shown that Russia possesses the resources to counteract strategies that it considers to be a threat to its national interests. Today, in contrast to the Vilnius summit, the EU and some partner countries have to act with one eye on the Kremlin, which means that the Ukrainian conflict has deepened the divide between and within the regional states. The Riga summit vividly demonstrated the diversity of the countries in the Eastern Partnership, which offers a single ideology to a very broad sweep of peoples and countries³.

The leading elites of Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova are gravitating towards the Euro-Atlantic community. At the same time, the Ukrainian crisis has increased the polarization of the Moldovan society, heightening both pro and anti-Russian sentiments. Thirty-nine percent of Moldovans condemn the Russian action in Crimea, while 40 percent consider the annexation a legitimate action. According to the same poll quoted earlier, only 29 percent of Moldovans support the country's full European integration, while an almost equal percentage supports the Customs Union (Litra, 2014). Moldovan population fears the repetition of the Ukrainian scenario. It is very symbolic that the presidential election in Moldova held in November 2016 showed that the country is still deeply divided. The Pro-Russian candidate Igor Dodon won 52.2% while the pro-Europe rival, Maia Sandu scored 47.8% (The Guardian, 2016).

Belarus, Russia's partner in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), was not interested in the political reforms proposed under the Eastern Partnership, the objective being to lift sanctions and reap economic dividends. Armenia, another CSTO member and EEU ally of Russia, on the contrary, committed itself only to the political part of the Association Agreement. Like Belarus, Azerbaijan snubbed political reform, as well as EU membership. In fact, Azerbaijan is much better suited to the format of the Euro-Mediterranean association agreements. Azerbaijan's main interest is in the energy component of the Agreement, in particular the Southern Gas Corridor project, in which Baku is heavily involved. The participating countries disagreed

³ Further explained in Nadia Alexandrova-Arbatova, The Eastern Partnership summit in Riga didn't achieve much, *Russia Direct*, 27 May 2015, <http://www.russia-direct.org/opinion/eastern-partnership-summit-riga-didnt-achieve-much>.

over the wording of the text of the final declaration with regard to Russia's annexation of Crimea. The split between Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, on one side, and Belarus and Armenia, on the other, was nothing but predictable. Azerbaijan remained equidistant between the two camps. The Riga summit showed that in order to avoid becoming a footnote, the Eastern Partnership needs rethinking and reformatting. As for Russia, it has reason to chortle at such a routine and incoherent EaP summit. But one person's failure does not necessarily mean another's success⁴.

3.3. EaP, the Ukrainian conflict and the Black Sea security dimension

The growing confrontation around CIS neighbourhood on the macro level of the Russia-West relations has already been projected to the Black Sea region. "The geopolitical 'grand chessboard' in the Black Sea area is being reordered, with the Euro-Atlantic community on the one side and Russia on the other seeking to reconfigure their overlapping spheres of influence in the aftermath of the Crimean crisis" (Csernaton, 2014). Leaving aside the regional energy security, which is worth a lot more thinking on its own, three immediate threats to the regional security can be singled out.

The first security threat is related to the most negative scenario in Ukraine: growing tensions, the renewal of full scale military actions, the US provision of military aid to Ukraine, which would be interpreted by Moscow as a declaration of war, Russia's direct military involvement in Ukraine including Russia's threat to use tactical, new bipolarity, new dividing line in the region, Europe and international relations at large. The implementation of the Minsk agreement is paralyzed. In this situation and in case of new tensions in the Russian-American relations after the November presidential election in USA, the question of sending American military personnel to Ukraine could become topical again - which could easily be construed by Moscow as U.S. involvement in the war (Bodner, 2015). Put simply, whatever the form of the US military involvement in Ukraine, it will inevitably lead to escalation of the conflict.

The second threat is unintended military escalation in the Black Sea area. The renewed tensions with Russia and more confrontations with Russian forces on the high seas have already turned the Black Sea into an operational theatre as it was in the Cold war time. The integration of Crimea into the Russia Federation is viewed by Western analysts as a reinforcement of Russia's naval presence in the Black Sea. The Western concerns that Russia's maritime power has been dramatically enhanced (Delanoë, 2014, pp. 2-3) due to the takeover of Crimea

⁴ Further explained in Nadia Alexandrova-Arbatova, The Eastern Partnership summit in Riga didn't achieve much, *Russia Direct*, 27 May 2015, <http://www.russia-direct.org/opinion/eastern-partnership-summit-riga-didnt-achieve-much>.

(extended coastline and a new deployment capability) are exaggerated. Moscow's naval power in the Black Sea is challenged by a set of qualitative factors, first and foremost, by the Black Sea geography.

While the Black Sea has the most pleasant climate and conditions in all of Russia, it has possibly the worst strategic location of all the four fleets. The only exit from the Black Sea is through the 180 mile long controlled Turkish Straits. According to strategic perceptions, the Black Sea is a small size closed aquatorium. Aside from this, it takes only 50 minutes (not to mention missiles) for a modern fighter to fly over the Black Sea from the east to the west and only 15 minutes – from the north to the south. In case of a hypothetical conflict with NATO, Russia's Black Sea fleet, whatever its size, would be trapped in this aquatorium and become just a floating target for the aircrafts, missiles and torpedoes of the opponent (Arbatov, 2010, p. 107).

The immediate military threat is related to the risk of unintended escalation: narrowly avoided mid-air collisions, close encounters at sea, and the danger of losing control over events. Since the crisis erupted, the destroyers Donald Cook, Truxtun and Ross, the cruiser Vella Gulf and the frigate Taylor have all made high-profile appearances in the Black Sea. New ports have opened up to sailors deploying to 6th Fleet as well, including Varna, Bulgaria; Constanta, Romania; and Batumi, Georgia, which have all hosted U.S. ships since the Ukraine crisis began (Larter, 2014). On 7 September 2014, the Canadian frigate Toronto was buzzed by a Russian aircraft in the Black Sea with the plane coming within 300 metres. The Toronto locked its radar on the Russian plane but took no further action as the Russian plane was not armed. The incident coincided with larger Russian larger naval combat training activities near Sevastopol. A recent incident, and not the only one, in which a Russian warplane flew close to the guided-missile destroyer Donald Cook in the Black Sea should serve as a warning against a dangerous game of brinkmanship (Frear, Kulesa and Kearns, 2014).

The third threat is the proliferation of conflicts in the Black Sea area. The region is directly involved in the Russia-EU/West rivalry in the CIS, since six EaP partners geographically or geopolitically belong to the region. Theoretically, a key factor will be the ability for the West and Russia to find a compromise but in the context of the war in Ukraine such a compromise is out of question.

The Moldovan population fears the repetition of the Ukrainian scenario.

As things stand now, Russia does not need to take severe action in Moldova to derail its European course, as the Moldovan domestic situation serves Russian purposes well. A reversal from the Association Agreement is still possible in Moldova (Litra, 2014).

However, in a divided country, a civil war cannot be completely excluded. Armenia and Belarus (which is related to the region only as an observer in the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation - BSEC) are members of

the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). However, recent developments indicate that two of Moscow's most loyal allies in the former Soviet Union, Belarus and Armenia may be reassessing their ties with Russia in light of the country's standoff with the West. The president of Belarus, Lukashenka has already declared that the integration in the Eurasia Union would never achieve the level of integration that existed in the State Union between Russia and Belarus. This should be viewed as a kind of message to Moscow since the State Union is a purely symbolic project.

Russia's assertiveness in Ukraine has augmented the intrinsic fears of the Belarusian leadership. Lukashenka is an authoritarian ruler and worries about any possible limitations to his powers. The fact that Russia puts its own interests in the post-Soviet space above all else exacerbates his fears that Putin may turn the Eurasian Union into another USSR (Preiherman, 2014, p. 19).

While Belarus is not a regional country, Armenia is not only a permanent member of BSEC but also a part of the Caucasus-Black Sea region. Armenia has decided not to sign the Association Agreement with the EU and joined the Eurasian Customs Union for security reasons. A key driver behind Yerevan's orientation toward Moscow is a conflict with Azerbaijan over the breakaway territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. A particular challenge for Armenia is that economic growth in Turkey and Azerbaijan is quite strong, which tilts the balance of power in the region to Armenia's disadvantage (Tadevosyan, 2014, p. 10). Yerevan has been trying to maintain some elements of a "complementary" foreign policy, in its relations with the European Union, and NATO. However, Armenia's foreign policy preferences "beyond Russia" are strongly constrained by its regional insecurity and dependence on the Russian military support.

The Ukrainian crisis has already affected the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, since fighting has increased along the line of contact between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Violence spiked in August 2014, and in November 2014, Azerbaijani forces shot down an Armenian helicopter. As it is seen from Yerevan, this can but question Russia's commitment as a security guarantor since Azerbaijan has gained more room to manoeuvre in the conflict because of Russia's focus on the Ukrainian theatre. "Russia's military backing is crucial to Armenia, but the continuation or escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict - such as Azerbaijani forces' alleged shoot-down of an Armenian unmanned aerial vehicle Jan. 29 - will test Yerevan's resolve (Stratfor, 2015)".

Azerbaijan has been torn between the West and Russia. On the one hand, Azerbaijan is seeking to strengthen its position as a regional energy power as well as a reliable partner of the West in the region. On the other hand, Moscow still retains a strong influence on Azerbaijan in three areas: the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the unresolved legal status of the Caspian Sea, separatism among ethnic

minorities (mainly Lezgins) in the northern provinces of Azerbaijan bordering the Russian Republic of Dagestan (Abbasov, 2014, pp. 14-15). As a result of the Ukrainian crisis, Azerbaijan's new importance as an increasingly important gas supplier to Europe has reinforced its leverage over Russia, a development that could explain the shift in the Nagorno-Karabakh theatre during the past year.

Violence around Karabakh began to pick up from January 2014. Clashes that began in April 2016 marked the worst violence since a separatist war ended in 1994 and left Nagorno-Karabakh – officially a part of Azerbaijan – under the control of the local ethnic Armenian forces and the Armenian military (Isachenkov, 2016). Armenian forces also occupy several areas outside the Karabakh region. Interestingly, Russia's incorporation of Crimea exacerbated uncertainties on both -Armenian and Azeri - sides. Azeri have interpreted this Russian step as providing Armenia with a precedent – to formally annex Karabakh, while Armenians have become anxious about Russia's decision to pursue arms sales to Azerbaijan.

The Ukrainian conflict has exacerbated the security concerns and vulnerabilities of Georgia. Georgians are fearful that there could be an attempt by Russia to use its “hard and soft power” to secure its “vital interests” in the South Caucasus and to put Georgia's Euroatlantic aspirations to an end or to drag Georgia into confrontation by demanding a military corridor and overland access from South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and the North Caucasus to Russia's military base in Gyumri, Armenia (Liluashvili, 2014, p. 24).

Summing up, the Black Sea region remains plagued by insecurities and unpredictable conflicts. An unexpected event, like a renewed escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh, or sudden internal political unrest in Moldova or any other regional country might trigger new conflicts in the region.

3.4. Ukraine, Russia and EEU

The Ukrainian conflict has strongly affected Russia, having gone not only through politics and economy but families and friendships. It split the Russian society into two unequal parts. The majority of the population supports Kremlin's policy on Ukraine and Crimea's incorporation looks quite legitimate in the eyes of ordinary Russians. They view Western sanctions on Russia as an attempt “to bring the country to its knees”. Anti-Western rhetoric is gaining momentum in Russia fuelling neo-Imperial motives in part of the Russian political elite, which looks scary for Moscow's allies in the CSTO and Eurasia Economic Union (EEU).

Crimea's incorporation and different interpretations of the concept of the Russian world by Russian politicians encouraged Minsk and Astana to take a more equidistant position on the Ukrainian conflict. Neither Belarus nor Kazakhstan have joined the Russian embargo on products from the EU countries, Norway, USA, Canada and Australia, imposed by Moscow as a response to Western

sanctions against Russia. It should be noted also that even prior to the conflict in Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan were cautious about the proposal of Russia to create a Eurasian Union as a new integrationist body modelled from the EU, with a single political, economic, military, customs, humanitarian and cultural space.

Concerned about the problems of equality in the new Union, the political leaders of Belarus and Kazakhstan have repeatedly stressed that they are in favour of economic integration, but not of the creation of supranational political structures, emphasizing that EEU participants should remain sovereign independent States. As a result, the Eurasian project presented in the program article by Vladimir Putin “New integration project for Eurasia – a future that is born today” (Putin, 2011) was narrowed to the Eurasian Economic Union. The level of integration of the EEU (also joined by Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, mainly for political reasons) is higher than in the Customs Union but lower than in the Russian-proposed Eurasian Union.

4. Conclusions. What should be done?

The future of Russia-West relations and international security will depend on the outcome of the Ukrainian conflict. A future paradigm shift would be contingent on the West defining a clear strategy vis-à-vis Russia, based on a careful balance between its values and realistic objectives as well as the lessons drawn from the past. As for Russia, nowadays, we see that it was naive to think that the highly centralized authoritarian Russian system that existed for centuries could be smoothly transformed overnight.

Given the negative trends in international relations, there is an urgent need to de-escalate the conflict in Ukraine. To this end, a real and not temporary ceasefire is required. The implementation of the Minsk-2 agreement is singled out as the main precondition for the normalization of the Russia – West relations. But the implementation of Minsk-2 is difficult to achieve because of the different interpretations of the Agreement provisions by Kiev, on the one side, and Donetsk and Lugansk, on the other side, as well as by the anti-Poroshenko opposition in Ukraine and anti-Western opposition in Russia.

To this end, a real and not temporary ceasefire is required. This can be achieved by the deployment of international peacekeeping forces under the UN Security Council mandate in order to create conditions for the implementation of the Minsk -2 agreement. These peacekeeping forces recruited from the OSCE countries, including Russia, should be deployed in the corridor between the two dividing lines resulted from Minsk-1 and Minsk-2 agreements. The OCSE observers should be posted along the Russian-Ukrainian (eastern part) borders. This situation will put the implementation of the Minsk-2 agreement into a new political context. The USA should naturally join the peace process, possibly in a regular bilateral format with Russia.

The political structure of Ukraine is a domestic problem. But, certainly, the present arrangement should be changed, because devolution is always better than revolution. Much greater financial and social autonomy should be given to the rebellious regions. A great deal will also depend on the ability of the new Ukrainian elite to implement painful economic reforms, build robust institutions and end the system of corrupt political, economic, and criminal power.

On the macro level, it would be important to come back to the unfinished job of the 90s and hold a big peace forum which would promote security arrangements in Europe and in the post-Soviet space. The neutral status of Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Azerbaijan should be guaranteed by security, sovereignty and de-facto existing territorial integrity. Withdrawal and reduction of military forces of NATO and Russia around them must be insured by new conventional arms control agreements and confidence building measures in addition to the Open Skies and Vienna Document regimes. Their economic development and association with the EU and other countries should incorporate Russian political, economic, and humanitarian interests. The rights of ethnic minorities must be safeguarded and legal provisions and procedures must be elaborated for peaceful secession as an extreme measure if preservation of territorial integrity proves impossible.

The Russia –West relations will probably never be the same unless Russia returns to its European vocation. Yet, a peaceful solution would give the EU and Russia a chance to minimize the damage and at least save the key channels of interaction, which are essential for global and regional security. In light of the current political events, the idea that Russia and the West should cooperate on economics, security and arms control looks rather utopian, although it was perceived as quite natural and immutable just several years ago. Peace should not be taken for granted. Its maintenance and enhancement require relentless efforts.

Despite the fact that the relations with the West have entered the most difficult period after the end of the Cold war 20 years ago, there is no doubt that the majority of the Russian population, passing through a period of nationalist euphoria, will sooner or later recognize its European civilizational identity in its widest sense. Another question is whether Europe as a unique civilization will survive under the current challenges of internal and external threats. Will the European politicians of today's generation, grown up in the comfortable conditions of post-bipolar peace, have enough wisdom, determination and resources to save Europe as a whole? The solution of the "Ukrainian question" in the broad sense of the word may be the first step towards bridging the numerous gaps in the European space including the EU-Russia cooperation in the post-Soviet space based on specific functional projects across a range of fields and built upon a flexible geometry that encompasses all would-be participants.

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