

The Ukraine crisis: Poland as a strategic crossroad in Eastern Europe

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Abstract

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has highlighted Poland's significant geopolitical role in Eastern Europe. Despite ongoing conflicts since 2014, the recent escalation has increased regional security volatility, particularly for countries like Poland. This study examines Poland's strategic position and role in the Ukraine conflict by analysing its geopolitical and geostrategic implications within the broader Eastern European framework. The research, employing qualitative content analysis and a phenomenological approach, investigates how Poland's geopolitical stance both influences and is influenced by the evolving dynamics of the Ukraine war and Eastern European geopolitics. Our findings indicate that Poland has not only reinforced its strategic importance in the area, but also shaped its role as a key player in the ongoing conflict. This engagement reflects a broader strategy to counter Russian aggression while strengthening ties with NATO and the EU, thereby enhancing its sway in the region.

Keywords: Ukraine conflict, Poland, Eastern Europe, geopolitics, regional security

Introduction

Due to its location between two major powers (Russia and Germany) and to the lack of natural barriers between them, Poland has one of the most volatile histories worldwide. Since the end of the Cold War, Poland has made explicit attempts to align its political future, military security, and economic success with Western institutions, notably NATO and the European Union (EU). These geopolitical decisions paid off handsomely, as post-communist Poland earned both the US and NATO security umbrellas, as well as economic success through EU membership. Considering its geographical position as the eastern edge of both NATO and the EU, Poland has become the crossroad of various geopolitical nexus of world politics. The argument posits that Poland has been an important player in Central and Eastern Europe. After its integration in NATO and the EU, Poland has been a key player in terms of Western instruments implementation.

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However, Ukraine has also had a long and turbulent history due to devastation, suppression, and discontinuity. The country also faced the absence of independent statehood because it surrendered to powerful neighbours. Ukrainian land was confronted between Europe and Asia empires, and also with ethnic worlds such as Orthodox, Catholic, and Muslim. The invaders and colonisers of the rich and fertile lands included Tatars, Poles, Turks, Mongols, Russians, and Germans. Historically, there had been rivalry between Moscow and Lithuania over the territories of Ukraine. In 1569, it was formed within the Commonwealth union of Poland and Lithuania. Theroute and relations of Poland with Ukraine can be traced back then. This is because ‘all ethnically Ukrainian lands’ were practically under Polish rule. In the era of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, there was pressure to adapt the Polish ways of Catholicism.

The Treaty of *Andrusovo* was signed between Poland and Russia and then Ukraine was divided into two parts in 1667 (Nahaylo, 1999; Zafar, 2015). At the end of the 18th century, Poland was declined, and Russia took Ukraine over and the western territory was acquired by Austria. In 1921, under the terms of the *Treaty of Riga*, the western territories of Ukraine were awarded to Poland, Czechoslovakia, and partially to Romania. The Treaty of Riga was signed between Poland and Russia. After World War II, the same western territories came under the Soviet Union, and both Poland and Ukraine, together with Czechoslovakia and part of Romania became members of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). In 1945, the same year, Ukraine became a member of the United Nations (UN). In 1954, Crimea was transferred to Ukraine by the Soviet Union (Zafar, 2015). This is a short overview of the history of how Poland, Ukraine, and Russia entangled between the rusty past of geopolitics until the fall of the USSR in 1991. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the expansion of NATO increased and now includes the Central and Eastern European states from the former Warsaw Pact. This type of Western enlargement toward Central and Eastern Europe has always made Moscow feel uncomfortable. The end of Cold War came with Putin’s litmus test and revival of Russian actor-ship on taking stance against Europe (Rutland, 2015).

In light of the aspects considered above, the study examines the contemporary flashpoint of the crisis, seeking to identify the primary causes that triggered the war in Ukraine while also addressing Poland’s position and its implications in the context of the conflict.

To substantiate the above arguments, a qualitative content, discourse, and phenomenological analysis has been applied within a pragmatic research design. Qualitative content analysis is an analytical technique that helps to summarise and interpret texts. There are two methods to understand ‘the importance of content’: 1) the researcher has flexibility for rational judgment of texts through ‘intrinsic value, interest and originality of materials’, and 2) it provides space for quantitative stimulation of the texts through the development of a more objective and systematic analysis of communications twisted by governments, leaders, and other officials

through newspapers, press briefs, and television news (Burnham, 2008). The war in Ukraine is not a new phenomenon in social science, especially in international relations. There is a need to understand the origins of the Ukraine crisis, so discourse analysis provides a comprehensive nature of critical and narrative assessment (Pierce, 2008). The goal of the phenomenological method is ‘to describe, understand and interpret’ the meaning of the political and social phenomena of international relations. Subsequently, it focuses on generating findings that can understand a particular situation such as the Ukraine crisis and the role of external actors. Likewise, we can understand philosophy and psychology of roots in the diplomatic context (Bloor & Wood, 2006).

All of these research approaches analyse the primary and secondary sources of data available on the subject of the research. The research adopts primary data sources: statements, reports, announcements, press briefs and other government official documents carried out by ministers and diplomats. Secondary data sources followed books and book chapters, articles, magazines, reports and papers by think tanks and NGOs, newspaper clips, editorials, and opinions. These are the main materials used in the study for a pragmatic assessment of the Ukraine crisis in the central context of Poland’s involvement along with other powers.

1. Politics of a geography: defining geopolitics and geostrategy

Kjellen and Sandmeier (1924), a Swedish publicist, is credited with coining the term ‘geopolitics’. In his work, ‘Der Staat als Lebensform’, he defined geopolitics as ‘knowledge of a country as a geographic organism or a phenomenon in space’. He also highlighted a series of branches describing the country’s diverse interests, including politics, politics of authority, economic politics, ethno-politics, and social politics, as well as geopolitics. Robert Sieger defined geopolitics as ‘geographical politics’, which he defined as ‘labelling the art’, from a geographical point of view, nation management (Kiss, 1942). Geopolitics starts where one deals with political forecasting in terms of space, which encompasses the country’s economic and demographic potential. In other words, geopolitics encompasses a wide variety of knowledge across the biological and social divides. Therefore, geopolitics is a discipline that connects political processes to their geographical surroundings. It is founded on a broad geographical foundation, particularly political geography, which is defined as the study of the political organizations of space and their structures. Geopolitics aspires to be and must be “the country’s geographical soul.” Huntington, Mackinder, and Mahan, all had a similar understanding of geopolitics.

In simple terms, geopolitics, in the traditional academic sense, is concerned with the geography of international politics, notably the relationship between the physical environment (location, resources, territory, and so on) and foreign policy action. Geopolitics is thought to be a world of harsh truths, material realities, and

inescapable natural facts, according to its own definitions and terminologies (Sprout & Sprout, 1960). Geopoliticians have profited from the geopolitical analyses' ostensibly objective materialism. According to Gray (1988), geopolitical analysis is unbiased as to one or another political system or philosophy. It deals with the foundations of international politics, the persistent geopolitical realities in which the game of international politics takes place. These geopolitical realities are believed to constitute long-term physical factors in foreign policy. In such a theory, geography is considered a non-discursive reality, as it is distinct from the social, political, and ideological components of international politics.

The attempt to analyse the politics of a geography can be accommodated within three areas: research of a geographical area, research of a country and, research of the political process in behavioural meaning. Likewise, the politics of a geography can be divided into three spheres; Landscape, Ecological, and Organic (Otok, 1985). When we talk about geographical and geopolitical positions, we can conclude that the geostrategic position is determined by three variables. They combine the physical location in the natural environment, the political circumstances among certain countries in a given period, and the military potential of the country and its neighbours. In terms of strategic thinking, the location that a country has in its geographical surroundings might be defined as less or more profitable from a military standpoint (Wendt, 2000).

The relationship between geopolitics and geostrategy is frequently viewed from many angles. The characteristics of geo-strategy as a sub-discipline of geopolitics may be found in the literature although their relationship is understood in terms of their equal status in political thought (Baczwarow, 2002) or even the status of geopolitics as an auxiliary discipline of geostrategic studies (Sykulski, 2013). Geostrategy, which differentiates from geopolitics and classical military geography in terms of foreign policy, is concerned with the examination of the geo-surroundings' situations in one's own country and neighbouring ones. This fact places geography in a classical geopolitics framework rather than a military geography framework. However, we must keep in mind that many scientists, notably in the United States, have used both terms: geostrategy and geopolitics, sometimes interchangeably. We may find some models that present the geopolitical development associated with geostrategy in a variety of publications. Geostrategy is thus essentially related to the line of their foreign policy from the perspective of medium/middle and small states. The issue of changes is primarily related to the decline, respectively, connected with the strengthening of existing centres of power, but also with the creation of new ones, in the geopolitical context in which governments function. Small, medium, and medium-sized states must be able to respond quickly to such developments. The state must embrace geostrategic decisions that reflect objective geopolitical situations (Sykulski, 2013).

While we attempt to analyse the position that Poland holds in the Russia-Ukraine war, the behaviour can only be explained through the eye of the 'geo' factor

of it. Historically, and also contemporaneously, Poland's location, politics, and geography, strategy play a primary role in a war like that between Russia and Ukraine. Poland is one of the many specks on the world's political map and one of the largest within the European Union's borders, but it also occupies a unique position – sandwiched between two great millstones of European history: Western and Eastern Europe, Western and Orthodox civilisation, Germanic and Eastern Slav nations, Germany, and Russia (Solarz, 2014). However, we can find academic works which argue that, after the Second World War, the political geography and strategy regarding Poland lost its relevancy. On the contrary, this paper is more inclined towards the idea that the relevancy of the political geography of Poland has been revived after the end of the Cold War and is still in play. Polish scholars, such as M. Kieczewski, J. Loth, W. Nakowski, S. Pawowski, E. Romer, J. Smoleski, and S. Srokowski have extensively worked on the development of political geography, which is still highly applicable.

2. Genesis of the Ukraine crisis

As discussed above, the geography of Ukraine has been volatile since the emergence of the idea of the country. There has always been a diplomatic nexus between Europe and Russia since the era of kinship and the great empire. The democratic footprints were chosen by the leaders of Ukraine as the republic style of government, but its sovereign presence has not been very strong because the decision making for foreign policy has always been compromised between the EU, the US and other Western allies, and Russia. The 2014 Ukraine crisis serves as the perfect example for the geopolitical clashes between various parties in Ukraine. That was the first time that it emerged since the fall of the USSR. All this began when the former President Viktor Yanukovich 'rejected (Association Agreement-AA) a greater deal for the integration of Ukraine with the EU' in November 2013 (Fisher, 2014). The mass-level protest exploded, and Yanukovich tried to smash the protesters. The game of 'support or backed' started when Russia backed Yanukovich and protestors supported by the United States and the rest of Europe. Meanwhile, former President Yanukovich held student demonstrations against not signing AA in Kyiv. Yanukovich wanted the country closer to Putin than to the EU. On the other hand, Moscow had already proposed a customs union between Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan and also intended to include Ukraine in the union (Chadwick, 2022).

Similarly, dozens of protestors came out in Kyiv and police were killed, during what was called 'the bloodiest days of the Maidan Revolution' between 18 and 20 February 2014. On 21 February 2014, along with three opposition leaders, Yanukovich signed the agreement regarding the government of national unity, constitutional reforms, and calling for a new presidential election. On the next day, he fled from Kyiv and Verkhovna Rada voted to remove Yanukovich from his

office. Many political phenomena occurred in February 2014 and Russian reinforcements reached Crimea during 25-28 February (Charap & Colton, 2017, p. 10). In March, Putin obtained formal approval from the upper house of the Russian parliament to deploy military forces on Ukrainian territory. March was also full of political and diplomatic drama on every front. The next day, Western allies enacted a sanction against Moscow. The EU mentioned that the referendum was held after Russian troops invaded so it was an “illegal and illegitimate” accession of Crimea to Russia (Chadwick, 2022).

Furthermore, pro-Russian separatists started protests against Ukraine and rebels started seizing territory in eastern Ukraine in April 2014. There was fighting between rebels and the Ukrainian military. After the conflicts broke out, the rebels declared the independence of two regions of eastern Ukraine after referendum by Russian-speaking majority, regions known as Donetsk (pre-conflict population was 4.4 million) and Luhansk (2.2 million). These eastern territories are also known as the Donbas region and separatist self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. The Donbas crisis became an ethnic division between Russian speaking eastern and the Ukrainian speaking majority of rather western part. Since April 2014, an estimate said that more than 14,000 were killed (but the Vox report mentioned 2,500 Ukrainians killed) and nearly 24,000 injured (Fisher, 2014; Chadwick, 2022; Global Conflict Tracker, 2022). Since then, this has become a key point of the ongoing and unstoppable conflict between separatists and Ukrainian forces.

On 25 May 2014, the Ukrainian elected the new president Petro Poroshenko. Together with Georgia and Moldova, Ukraine signed the AAs with the EU on 27 June 2014. Meanwhile, the US Treasury Department imposed more sanctions on Russia in the following areas: financial, defence, and energy sectors (Charap & Colton, 2017). Even at those times, although Moscow denied its involvement, Ukraine and NATO were informed of the construction of troops and military equipment by Russia near Donetsk and Luhansk and Russian cross-border shelling. On 17 July 2014, rebels shot down Malaysian Airlines MH17 (flying from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur) over the Donbas region and 298 lost their lives. Separatists believed that it was Ukraine’s fighter flight. Here, the fight between the Ukrainian force and rebels intensified and separatists started to lose ground. The Dutch-led Joint Investigation Team (JIT) concluded its report that the ‘plane’ had been shot down by a Russian-built surface-to-air missile at a specific site near the Pervomaiskyi village (it was under rebel control) in October 2015. Later, investigators also reported that the missile was allocated by Russia. However, Moscow never accepted the final truth that it was fired by Russian-backed rebels and the missile system provided by Russia. Russia itself established an investigation committee that was named ‘key witness’ and they declared it was a Ukrainian Su-25 fighter’ (BBC, 2016; Fisher, 2014; Global Conflict Tracker, 2022; Wilson, 2014).

In August 2014, tensions reached a peak when the Russian army entered eastern Ukraine to support rebels which Moscow mentioned as “the peace-making

force”. After the Cold War, these crises brought West relations with Russia to the lowest point. Since then, Russian dominance has appeared from time to time in the name and support of separatists, which is referred to by the term ‘proxy war’ in the discourse of international relations (Fisher, 2014). No one imagined that ‘an internal political conflict’ could lead to an inevitable crisis between two major powers after the long gaps of the Cold War. While the west imposed various sanctions on Russia due to its involvement in the Ukrainian territory, Russia also reverted with counter-sanctions, with bans on agricultural and food items from the West on 7 August 2014. Before peace negotiation, the Ukrainian force defeated by rebel counter-offensive attack backed by Russia ended in Ilovaik. Between 2014 and 2015, two Minsk agreements focused on ‘a ceasefire’ were signed between Ukraine and Russia. On 5 September 2014, the Minsk Agreement (Minsk-I) was signed between representatives of Russia, Ukraine and separatists (Donetsk People’s Republic-DNR and Luhansk People’s Republic-LNR) and a ceasefire was signed in Minsk City of Belarus. From time to time, repeated violations of the ceasefire agreement took place between both sides, which sometimes turned into a ‘trench war’ (Charap & Colton, 2017; Chadwick, 2022).

On 12 February 2015, the 16-hour marathon peace negotiations were finalized as the new ceasefire deal for the Donbas region in Minsk (also called Minsk II). The negotiations went through the night ‘between Russian President Vladimir Putin, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, French President Francois Hollande, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel’. The Minsk II agreement included the following key points: 1) immediate and full bilateral ceasefire, 2) withdrawal of all heavy weapons by both sides, 3) release of all hostages and other illegally detained people, 3) full Ukrainian government control over the state border would be restored, and 4) withdrawal of all foreign armed groups, weapons, and mercenaries from Ukrainian territory (BBC, 2015; Charap & Colton, 2017). After this entire 2014 Ukraine crisis, Wilson (2014) stated that ‘Russia’s action was really Putin’s action’. This action is not only limited to him, but Russian history itself has produced many leaders who were addicted to power, which translates to authoritative governance and aggressive approach to its neighbours. As a result, Moscow, under the power addiction of Putin, had the opportunity to take revenge for the ‘lost territory’ of USSR which still remains as a humiliation in Russian history. Likewise, Russian power and influence have been challenged by the NATO’s presence in Eastern Europe, which makes Putin act on behalf of the Russian speaking population in Ukraine.

The high-voltage conflict escalated in 2014 and 2015, it never stopped, and the Donbas region experienced several violations of ceasefire. When Donald Trump became president of the United States, he considered a new arms package for Ukraine in 2017. Before the Obama administration, the policy was not to provide ‘lethal defensive weapons’ to Ukraine. The Trump administration promised to fulfil the tools to conduct electronic warfare, logistics, and intelligence equipment such as satellite imagery. At the end of 2017, the former Ukrainian Defense Minister, Pavlo

Klimkin, mentioned that Moscow ‘deployed thousands of armoured vehicles (almost 2,000) and troops into the Donbas region to support rebels. Moscow had always denied the military involvement in the eastern region of Ukraine which was already devastated by war. The Defense Minister also said that ‘In the sense of planning, steering, and operating specific warfare, it’s all Russians’. At the same time, the US, Canada, and other Western allies conducted a joint training program in the city of Lviv (Western Ukraine). Overall, both signing parties of Minsk II violated the peace deal signed in 2015 (Shinkman, 2017).

3. The rise of the crisis (2021/2022)

Zapad 2021 (meaning ‘west’) is known for famous military drills or joint exercise between Belarus and Russian military forces. According to Kremlin press information, Moscow announced a week-long military exercise as per year’s annual strategic level (STRATEX) scheduled for 10-16 September 2021 (Norberg & Simpson, 2021). This large-scale Russian-Belarusian exercise has started to attract attention and speculation from around the world. Moscow indicated that nearly 200,000 troops are involved in Zapad 2021 and this event is conducted by Russia every four years. It was one of the largest military drills conducted in Europe since the Cold War. Wilk & Żochowski (2021) argued that the initial phase of training began in July 2021, and the preparation of this military drill started at the end of 2020. The objective of this exercise is focused on the preparedness against the direct challenge of Belarus and Russian alliance to rising aggression by NATO (Magnay, 2021). But Kofman (2021) argued that ‘Zapad’ is not just military theatre, but that it is meant to affirm that years of modernization and reform have made the Russian military a force with increased ‘capability, readiness, and mobility’ (Kofman, 2021).

In October 2021, Russian troops started moving with military equipment towards the bordering area of Ukraine. There were commercial satellite imagery and posts on social media about the increased military presence around the Ukrainian border between November and December. During this time, the Siberian Novosibirsk command of the Russian army came to encircle the Ukrainian border. According to US intelligence officials, there were more than 100,000 troops in December and the agency warned there could be a potential invasion of Ukraine by early 2022. The Kremlin plan indicated that ‘a military can involve up to 175,000 troops (Global Conflict Tracker, 2022; Schwirtz & Reinhard, 2022). On 17 December, the Kremlin issued a list of demands from the West, and the ‘highly contentious’ list mentioned security guarantees so that there could be ‘lower tensions in Europe and defuse the Ukraine crises. At the strategic level, Moscow also presented two demands; first, to completely stop the idea of integrating Ukraine into NATO and second, to minimise the deployment of troops and NATO weapons in the eastern flank. Moscow threatened that if the ‘legal guarantee’ of Russia could not be provided, then there could be a similar military response to the Cuban Missile Crisis

of 1962. NATO head, Jens Stoltenberg, and a senior official, Jen Psaki, said that the proposal is ‘unacceptable’ (Roth, 2021).

On 29 November 2021, Minsk made another announcement of military drills with Russia near the southern border with Ukraine. They cited that this exercise is a counter-response to increasing NATO military alliance and offensive capabilities near their borders (Reuters, 2021). Earlier in February 2022, Russia conducted military drills with Belarus. Joint manoeuvres with Belarus, which included warplanes, missile launchers, and live fire exercise were carried out until 20 February. The Russian Defence Ministry cited it as ‘suppressing and repelling external aggression during a defensive operation’ (Chappell, 2022). The Guardian reported from Kyiv that Russia moved up almost 30,000 troops, two battalions of S-4000 surface to air missile system and many fighter jets, which has been taking part in the training exercise with Belarussian army (Walker, 2022). However, Western media, Ukraine, the US and NATO allies translated this action into a potential invasion of Ukraine. The United Kingdom Premier, Boris Johnson, mentioned it as ‘Europe’s biggest security crisis in decades’. The 2022 defence drills, also known as ‘Allied Resolution 2022’, took place close to the Belarusian border with Ukraine. Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, translated these drills as ‘the accumulation of forces at the border is psychological pressure from our neighbours’ (BBC, 2022).

On the other hand, the Belarusian-Russian exercises were preceded for the first time by large-scale, genuine hybrid activities. The most important one was when the Belarusian government incited a refugee crisis along the border with three NATO nations. It contributed to a rise in regional tensions and the declaration of emergencies in several areas of Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania. Alongside the manoeuvres, there was a campaign of revisionist history spearheaded by Russia and Belarus, aimed at Poland.

On 24 February 2022, Putin approved a ‘special military operation’ in Ukraine and bigger attacks were carried out on land, air and sea. The Western allies regarded this attack as an invasion of Ukraine, which is considered one of the biggest confrontations since World War II. Ukraine, the West and the whole world is saddened by Putin’s immediate aggression. The West retaliated with heavy sanctions on Russia. The Western allies once again cleared that they would not defend Ukrainian territories against Russian troops (Al Jazeera, 2022). The war has now continuously been going on for more than 2 years, costing the life of more than 50,000 people (until June 2024). Likewise, since 2021, Polish border guards have thwarted almost 100,000 attempts by migrants to enter Poland illegally from Belarus. Latvia and Lithuania have stopped about 25,000 and 22,000 attempts, respectively. This is one of the biggest migration crisis that Poland has faced, which is not only shaping Poland’s overall positionality regarding the migration issues in the EU but is also creating many internal political tensions among parties.

4. Polish engagement in a crisis

The emergence of the Ukraine crisis in late 2021 started due to the massive deployment of troops near the Ukrainian border which later converted as the full fledged war against Ukraine since February 2022. This situation also reflects the conflict of 2014/15 which was the outcome of increased geopolitical temperature between the US allies and Russia. The US has warned of ‘severe consequences’ if ‘any military action is carried out in Ukraine’ (Sharma, 2022). The reaction of the USA and the allies was translating into international boycott of Russia and the severe sanctions. Meanwhile, France played shuttle diplomacy from Moscow to Kyiv to cool down the geopolitical crisis of Ukraine. Later, the German chancellor made the same effort. Until mid-March 2022, no collective peace negotiations were held, but were limited within shuttle and phone diplomacy. The relations between Moscow and Europe have deteriorated even more since then.

In all this strategic build-up since the full-scale war in Ukraine, Poland has had a highly significant role to play. Poland has been a significant geostrategic choke point between the Western allies and Russia since the end of the Cold War. In February 2022, President Biden deployed nearly 3,000 additional US troops in NATO border countries, Poland and Romania, to protect Eastern Europe. Biden said on deployment: “as long as he is acting aggressively, we are going to make sure that we can reassure our NATO allies and Eastern Europe that we are there” (Stewart & Antonov, 2022). In the Second World War (WW2), Poland was a key point and faced a worse humanitarian and state crisis of human civilization. Pawłuszko (2021) considered ‘the renaissance of geopolitical reflection’ important in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). While trying to understand the geopolitical significance of Poland, there are two major factors: 1) strategic point and 2) international projects. The geopolitical security sphere of Poland strengthened due to the close cooperation between the US and other NATO countries and EU member states. The Obama administration increased American initiatives in Poland. The Polish geopolitics and security nexus increased its importance more as the ‘Bucharest Nine’ (also known as B9) in 2015, which is a joint project between two countries and another is Romania (Pawłuszko, 2021).

Similarly, the rise of the Poland-Belarus border crisis is not a coincidence. Everything emerged after the Belarusian presidential election in August 2020. No one imagined that the result of this election can again lighten the Eastern European geopolitical crisis, where Poland is the focal point between western and eastern interests. Belarusian Aleksandr Lukashenko was the winner of the election with a landslide victory. Western scholars also consider him the last dictator of Europe (every now and then, Lukashenko himself complies with the last dictator of Europe narratives in the public speeches) as Lukashenko has been in power since 1994. The West and opponents of Lukashenko did not condense his victory, which triggered the birth of a new geopolitical crisis in the Europe. After that, the crackdown on mass

protests in the capitals of EU members and the EU responded with a round of sanctions against Belarus. All these events emerged as the ‘migrant crisis’ at the Poland-Belarus borders in 2021, which continues as one of the most severe migration crises that Poland has ever had to undergo until 2024. Poland and the western blocs translated it as ‘a form of hybrid warfare’ and pointed out that Russia is playing an unofficial role’. Poland and its NATO alliance started the ‘military readiness of the eastern flank’. This entire incident sought the attention of the EU on the energy security of Ukraine and EU member states (Fraszka, 2021; RANE, 2021). This is one of the key reasons why Belarus exuberantly initiated defence drills with Russia in February 2022.

Contextualizing the role of Poland in NATO, Friedman (2010) used a rhetoric for Poland to become the ‘US aircraft carrier’ on the eastern flank. The words of the American strategist George Friedman became true under the Trump administration. After his election, Trump came to Warsaw in order to participate in Three Sea Summit in 2017. On 6 July 2017, Trump reaffirms article 5 of the NATO treaty to urge Moscow ‘to stop its destabilizing activities in Ukraine and elsewhere.’ At that time, Polish President Andrzej Duda repeated that the US is “working with Poland in response to Russia’s actions and destabilizing behaviour”. Washington has initiated a \$ 7.6 billion deal with Poland to sell the Patriot missile defence system which will start fully functioning from the end of 2024. This could build a stronger defence wall at the eastern borders of NATO and stabilize the region. Referring to the USA’s deepening bilateral defence cooperation with Poland, a Kremlin spokesperson mentioned that there is a misunderstanding between Russia and the US (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2017).

In 2019, Trump assured that he would deploy another 1,000 troops to Poland. Trump also decided to take an American 52,000-strong contingent from Germany, including drones and other military equipment. This permanent shift of US base deal was purposed to Poland, where they are supposed to spend \$2 billion for building a new military base in the country to increase the deterrence capabilities against Russia. President Duda expressed his gratitude to Trump as ‘extreme kindness towards Poland and perfect understanding of Polish matters’. However, in those times, there was the question of who would spend \$2 billion. In the 2019 Polish president’s visit to the US, he agreed on the initial building of a 1,000 US military base in Poland. After the annexation of Crimea by Russia, there were 5,000 troops already rotated in and out of Poland as part of the 2016 NATO deal. Warsaw also ordered 32 F-35 fighter jets as part of a separate deal. All these deals created ‘disputes on the legal basis of the 1997 NATO-Russia founding act’ which Kremlin mentioned in the current draft of the Ukrainian crisis negotiations to the White House (BBC, 2019; Herszenhorn, 2018). Again, in 2020, both President Trump and Duda reiterated toward its commitment to a ‘stronger alliance’. Trump mentioned ‘I don’t think we’ve ever been closer to Poland than right now’, and Duda reacted as a ‘privilege and honour’. Trump repeated some of the 10,000 US troops relocated from

Germany to Poland along with 30 US F-16 fighter jets (stationed in Germany) to strengthen the eastern flank of NATO in order to combat Russian aggression (Davies, 2020).

The involvement of Poland in the Ukraine crisis can be traced back to 2014, as it was the first country to recognise the exile government of Arseniy Yatsenyuk. Polish NGOs extended their support to Euromaidan by organizing rallies in Polish cities and also arranged funds and medicines for Protestors in Ukraine (Jóźwiak & Piechowska, 2017). Partnering with Germany and France, Poland played a crucial role in the management of internal conflicts to avoid further bloodshed aftermath of 2014 Crimea annexation Lokomy (2017). As a policy reaction to the extreme volatile situation in the Eastern border, Warsaw adopted five fundamental issues of the Polish Foreign Policy Strategy for 2017-2020 'to ensure the stability of Poland's immediate neighbourhood'. Within the broader spectrum of the Polish neighbourhood approach, Matera (2020) found four crucial points for the Polish cooperation with Ukraine:

- A stable, democratic and West-oriented Ukraine is vital for Polish security. Ukraine should also be independent of Russia in terms of politics and economy.
- The participation of Poland in Ukraine is an element of the enhancement of Poland's position in the EU, which can be gained by acting as a supporter of Ukraine's integration with the West. Poland's reputation as an expert may help achieve its ambition to influence the policy of the EU toward the east as the Polish contribution to the common foreign policy.
- The perspective of opening a large market for Polish trade and investments should also be considered. A friendly Ukrainian government would be able to create stable conditions for the economic activities of Polish companies.
- Poland wants to discourage Russia from the destabilisation policy of Ukrainians of the latter and to curtail Russia's ambition to exert its influence in Eastern Europe.

From 2014 onward, helping to shape the new dimension of Poland's foreign policy to increasing the possibility to deter the Russian aggression has been the prioritized task for Western European countries. Pełczyńska-Nałęcz (2019) highlighted that "Poland has undertaken a geopolitical retreat, withdrawing from what can be called the fundamental 'dispute over the borders of the West'." While the Russian aggression against Ukraine was being prepared at the Belarusian border, the then Foreign Minister of Poland, Zbigniew Rau (also a chair of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe), made a visit to Moscow for the first time in a decade (The First News, 2022a). Olech (2021) also stressed on the need of Poland to have a pro-active engagement with Moscow on the side-line while supporting the Ukraine conflict. After his visit to Moscow, Foreign Minister Rau stated that "if Poland feels a rational desire to support its eastern neighbour, then, the political struggle with Russia has so far been very ineffective, and consecutive joint

rallies of Polish and Ukrainian presidents, calling for European values (“Europeanization” of Ukraine), will not contribute to a more rapid end of the conflict” (Olech, 2021). Since the rise of the Ukraine crisis in 2014, Poland managed Ukrainian refugees, and again, the US has shown its commitment that they will help if refugees flee (The First News, 2022b).

The combination of Polish geostrategic positioning in the larger Eastern Europe and Polish aspiration to be the security state, the stance that Poland has taken can rather be coined as a ‘Realist Turn’ in terms of understanding Russia. As Kyiv fights Russia and looks to the West for increased military and financial assistance, Warsaw has become a crucial ally (Al Jazeera, 2024). Despite the fact that there was some dent in the relationship related to the protest of the Polish farmers regarding the Ukrainian products getting on the Polish market, Poland has shown strong commitment to supporting Ukraine. Be it the logistical support or the support in an international forum, Poland has strongly pushed Ukraine’s fight against Russia. From a hawk eye perspective, Poland has shaped the political and cultural landscape of Ukraine during the last 20 years. Millions of Ukrainians have been welcomed to live, study, and work in the EU and NATO, which has been its steadfast supporter. It has also offered an alternative vision of what Ukraine could become as a true Central European nation: European, patriotic, openly anti-Russian, and economically successful - all under the protection of US security guarantees (Jukic, 2022).

5. Significance of external actors in the Ukraine crisis

The Ukrainian crisis is a large geopolitical tussle between the collective West and Russia. But to be precise, the crisis is the outcome of Russia’s aggression against the increasing proximity between the West and Ukraine. Russia aimed to blackmail the West and desired to seize some part of Ukraine which later turned into a full-scale invasion. It is also an attempt to destabilize the situation in Ukraine (economically, politically). However, due to the provocative actions from both the West and Russia, the situation has escalated to a full-scale war. Although, Poland remains the connector between the collective West and Russia, as the Eastern most border of the EU and the NATO, there are actors such as EU (as an institution) and US as the security provider of the Western Hemisphere.

In the past, the Russian aggression took different forms, like the situation of 2003 (Lambroschini, 2003; Didier, 2017). This was followed by the 2008 gas conflict, the 2014 Ukraine crisis, and the 2022 Russian-Ukrainian war. All previous crises has spillover implications to Poland. Despite the fact that Poland’s materialistic capabilities did not use to be as strong as nowadays, it has partnered with the US to support Ukraine (for instance, the joint communique of the then President of Poland and the Vice President of USA in 2014, after Russia’s

annexation of Crimea). Likewise, Poland is among the first nations in Europe which started to sell military equipment to Ukraine.

It was especially after the 2014 crisis that the west sided with Ukraine and introduced many sanctions against Russia. However, the sanctions did not stop Russia from being more aggressive in eastern Europe. In other words, it can be argued that the sanctions did not stop the war, but have only maintained the status quo. The difference between the conflict of 2014 and that of 2022 is in the fact that the west has renewed its approach in dealing with Russia. The collective West (the EU, the United States, the United Kingdom, etc.) behaves quite differently and acts more pro-actively regarding the supply of military equipment, immigrant management and in terms of putting pressure on Russia in every possible way. It should be noted that the EU, the USA, the UK, Turkey, and Poland help Ukraine in different ways and play their role in this issue.

Perhaps despite the strong stance and approach adopted by the EU toward the Russian war against Ukraine, the EU is in the most difficult position by comparison with other external actors, particularly Germany, which is the most closely linked to Russia's energy (gas) and business interests. On the other hand, by imposing tougher sanctions on Russia, many EU countries are causing great damage to themselves and their economies. The EU's primary aim is to balance between preserving European democratic values and economic interests. Such balancing may continue until the full implementation of the so-called "Green System" policy, which could replace Russian energy with new energy sources (wind energy, etc.). Likewise, the EU remains constantly concerned about the situation in Ukraine.

The EU has imposed various levels of sanction to Russia to deescalate the situation. In June 2020, during the 'Peace in Ukraine' summit in Switzerland, the European delegates even proposed to seize the foreign property of Russian enterprises and use the money for the reconstruction of Ukraine. But on the other hand, the EU is cautious regarding fulfilling the request of Ukraine to provide them with lethal weapons to support their offence toward Russia. On the contrary, Poland is in favour of providing Ukraine with any necessary modern military equipment.

Similarly, the role of the United States in the Ukrainian crisis is significantly different from the role of the EU. Understanding the strategically important geopolitical role of Ukraine, the United States is trying to control the situation in the country. Highly influenced by the conceptual idea of Brzezinski (1997) that the one who controls Eurasia controls the whole world, the USA has always been strategically motivated in the region. It should also be noted that, compared to 2014, US actions towards Russia have changed significantly, and now, the Americans have moved from a policy of appeasing the aggressor to real actions to combat it, thus starting to supply Ukraine with lethal weapons.

The USA's strategic community came to a conclusion that it is impossible to reach an agreement with Russia on equal terms. Breaching the Minsk agreement and the continuous aggression toward Ukraine contributed to the USA's changed

behaviours toward Russia. Especially after 2014, Ukraine's main goal in the fight against Russia has been to follow a roadmap to get NATO membership and Russia's main goal is to prevent this. In this situation, the United States is the main negotiator between Ukraine and the alliance to consider Ukraine's membership. The United States has communicated Ukraine that the door is open for it to integrate with the alliance, and also responds to Russia that it is unable to dictate its terms to both independent countries and NATO structures on who should and who should not get the membership. However, the United States is limited by the fact that any key decision on Ukraine must be agreed with European partners, and not all European partners are equally willing to provide Ukraine with lethal weapons, block Nord Stream 2, and of course, provide Ukraine with a MAP on NATO membership.

Realising the fact that not all EU and NATO members are willing to see Ukraine as a fellow member for various reasons, the Ukrainian government and diplomacy began to focus on creating separate bilateral or tripartite alliances with those countries. In particular, such countries are the United Kingdom, which has begun supplying Ukraine with lethal weapons and instructors, and has even stated that it is ready to send troops to Ukraine. Another country that is familiar with the Russian threat is Poland. The Polish authorities have declared that they have approved a bill in parliament to provide Ukraine with weapons of various kinds. The arrival of the prime ministers of the United Kingdom and Poland to Ukraine to establish a tripartite defence alliance outside NATO was important. Thus, one can see how Ukraine, realizing the unlikely possibility of obtaining a MAP for NATO membership, is quite successfully trying to create various defence and political alliances with powerful geopolitical players that are not economically or politically linked by alliances with Russia.

Also, a number of defence treaties, such as delivery of drones (Bayraktar) from Turkey, can be considered such an alliance. Turkey, a geopolitical player in the Black Sea region, is committed to mediate the conflict between Ukraine and Russia and determined to do everything to prevent Russian aggression against Ukraine (BBC, 2021). It can be concluded that the role of the EU, some individual attempts of European countries, the US and the collective action during the war in Ukraine have played a major role in keeping Russia in the back foot. Unlike the scenario of the 2014 crisis, which was filled by sympathy and communique, the war of 2022 brings major attention from Poland, the EU and the USA in the form of hardware military assistance to Ukraine.

Also, it should be noted that, in 2014, there was no synchronicity and one-sided vision of the perception of the Russian aggression toward Ukraine among all members of the "collective West". On the one hand, it also shows the weakness of the "collective measure" in the confrontation with Russia. However, it gave a signal that, beside the collective actions, there are some independent major geopolitical players such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Turkey, and Poland. On a larger note, the individual or the collective support that anyone is providing to the

Ukraine, due to the geostrategic location, Poland have been involved in such mechanism. The geographical proximity and the utmost intention to support Ukraine has been the key factor in Poland's approach toward the war in Ukraine.

Overall, the approaches adopted by either the USA or the EU have to travel through Poland. The main hub for foreign aid is located at the regional airport in the small town of Rzeszow in southeast Poland. Following the US decision to sanction 60 billion USD to aid Ukraine in its conflict with Russia, Germany will be the route by which Poland will receive the cutting-edge offensive systems. According to a Pentagon communiqué, the US military logistics can transport weapons and supplies to Rzeszow swiftly via C-17 aircraft or by rail (Hofmann, 2024).

Conclusions

The above assessment allows us to draw some conclusions regarding the conceptualization of the regional geopolitics and the role of the geostrategic factor in International Relations. Historically, Poland has remained one of the volatile lands due to its geographical position. Immediately after the Cold war, the academic work related to the geostrategy of Poland has had some different understandings regarding it. The foundational understanding of the geostrategy of Poland, also confront with the idea of Russia. After WWII, Poland (together with other states in the region) moved into the Central European void and, in Cohen's view, became part of a convergence zone, despite its desire to become a gateway. After joining the EU in 2004, it underwent a significant transformation. This act transformed Poland's geopolitical position as it became a part of the economically advanced maritime realms of the Atlantic and Pacific, according to Cohen's notion. Thus, when we try to analyse the geostrategic positioning of Poland in context with Russia, it confronts the very idea of the Russian intention in the region where Russia promotes the idea of 'United Russia' with the intention of including post-Soviet countries in their control sphere. On the other hand, the geostrategic community have also focused on the revival of '*Intermarium*'. The rebirth of the *Intermarium* concept in Poland was prompted by profound developments in European and worldwide geopolitics in the 1990s. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the states of Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were re-established, and this new scenario was particularly relevant to Pilsudski's understanding of the *Intermarium* concept. In light of these geopolitical shifts, the *Intermarium* concept has begun to resurface in Polish geopolitical thinking. In this context, the geo-strategic understanding of Poland clashes with the one that Russia has.

Second, Poland is the eastern edge of NATO, which has created a barricade for the possible invasion of Russia in Eastern Europe. The military station in Poland, as well as another in Romania, are examples of what Russian President Vladimir Putin perceives as a threat presented by NATO's eastward expansion - and part of his justification for his military encirclement of Ukraine. The two facilities are

described by the Pentagon as defensive and not related to Russia, but the Kremlin believes that they may be used to shoot down Russian rockets or launch offensive cruise missiles at Moscow. However, after the crisis of Ukraine, the eastern flank of NATO became vulnerable to Russian aggression.

Third, the war in Ukraine resembles the classic struggle between the ‘buffer state’ vs. the ‘sphere of influence’. In this stance, both the EU and Russia have gone through the dilemma of maintaining Ukraine as a buffer state or a sphere of influence. In general terms, powers in the geopolitical globe compete for dominance, and the buffer state is the product of this competition. The geopolitical deadlock between two or more regional or global powers seeking supremacy in the region or the world is known as a buffer state. Powers prefer to specify a fluid and buffer condition for countries located within their geopolitical area because joining or maintaining a buffer space can be very costly. Thus, due to the structural struggle between buffer and sphere of influence, the situation has escalated and again put the geostrategic position of Poland into jeopardy.

Fourth, the main reason for us to present the Ukrainian position while discussing the broader geopolitical significance of Poland is that Russian invasion and the total control of Ukraine will erase the buffer factor in Poland’s geostrategy in the eastern border. However, due to the fact that it is one of the key members of NATO, it is unlikely that Poland will face the same kind of attitude from Russia, but it will surely become the victim of Russian spillover aggression. Overall, whatever the context, Poland remains the geopolitical choke point between Russia and the EU.

Nevertheless, the combination of few factors, such as the geostrategic position of Poland, Ukraine’s future as the buffer state between NATO and Russia and the changing approach of the EU toward Russia, collectively working as the key aspect of the changing geopolitical landscape of the Eastern Europe. On the other hand, the increasing materialistic capabilities of Poland in both economic and security spheres turns it into the key to geopolitical decision making in Eastern Europe.

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