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Russia's war with Ukraine and Russia's revisionism on the international stage

<https://doi.org/10.34739/his.2022.11.19>

Abstract: *Russia's armed conflict with Ukraine, ongoing since 2014, has created conditions for Russia to revise the balance of power in Eastern Europe, and even the international order established after the Cold War. The aim of this article is firstly to show Ukraine, in a highly synthetic way, as a state at a crossroads but simultaneously a key state in terms of Russia's interests in the post-Soviet area, then the motives for Russia's redrawing the post-Cold War international order, taking into account the location and role of Ukraine. The article merely indicates the problem of research, and does not claim the right to comprehensively cover the issue in question.*

Key words: Russia-Ukraine war, Russia's revisionism, Ukraine, Russia, Ukraine's security, Central Europe's security

Introduction

The European Union has for many years been facing crises and turning points affecting the shape of its foreign policy, including towards its immediate neighbourhood.¹ This neighbourhood, both southern (Mediterranean) and eastern, has in recent years become unstable and begun to create problems for the security of adjacent states and regions. In the case of the southern neighbourhood, we are referring to the war in Syria and the resulting mass migration from that country into EU territory and the areas of the Middle East and North Africa. Meanwhile in the eastern neighbourhood, we are dealing with an armed conflict (hybrid war) between Russia and Ukraine in the Donbas, the annexation of Crimea, and challenges for the security of Eastern Europe, and even of Europe as a whole.

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¹ For more details on the crises for the EU cf.: Zielonka, 2014; Wojtaszczyk & Nadolska, 2015; Stępniewski, 2015b; Grosse, 2008.

The present analysis will be concentrated on Ukraine, located geopolitically in Eastern Europe. The states of Eastern Europe, namely Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine (and indirectly those of the Southern Caucasus) are currently positioned between the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance on one side, and an increasingly assertive Russian Federation on the other. In other words, the countries in the eastern neighbourhood of the EU are the subject of international rivalry. Bearing in mind the effects of the international environment on the situation of the countries of Eastern Europe, it should be pointed out that these are mainly the actions of the European Union (and indirectly NATO) and Russia, which is decisively (particularly in recent years: Russia's war with Georgia in 2008, and since 2014 Russia's war against Ukraine, which in 2022 transformed into a full-scale conflict) attempting to maintain its sphere of influence in the region of the Commonwealth of Independent states, as well as aiming to alter the balance of power not only on a European, but also global, scale. From the point of view of Russia's interests in Eastern Europe, it is Ukraine which appears as the country of crucial significance for Russia's foreign policy. One could risk stating that an unstable or dysfunctional Ukraine is in Russia's interests. An unstable Ukraine mired in internal conflicts is not an attractive partner (potential membership candidate) for Western structures such as the European Union or NATO. In addition, the Ukrainian crisis (the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the armed conflict in the Donbas since 2014, where Russia has been providing armed assistance to so-called separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk, and the current full-scale war) has created conditions to question the role of Russia in the post-Cold War international order. This article shows Ukraine, in a highly synthetic way, as a state at a crossroads, while also being a key state in terms of Russia's interests in the post-Soviet area, then the motives for Russia's redrawing of the post-Cold War international order, taking into account the place and role of Ukraine. The article merely indicates the problem of research, and does not claim the right to comprehensively cover the issue.

The significance of Ukraine for the Russian Federation's international position

One of the main geostrategic aims of the Russian Federation in Vladimir Putin's time is to rebuild its influences on the periphery, which were lost due to the collapse of the USSR. Analysing the actions of Russia with regard to states of Eastern Europe, it should be noted that in spite of 30 years passing since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation still strives to maintain a dominant position in Eastern Europe (more broadly the Commonwealth of Independent States), and applies various means to do so, including military strength in the case of the Russian-Georgian war of August 2008, and the ongoing war against Ukraine in Donbas. Its main objectives remain the desire to reintegrate the post-Soviet space and strengthen the position of Russia as a leader in the region. This is the position of

a great power that it is to assure Russia exclusive control over the post-Soviet space, and enable it to realise its role as a global power – one of the axes of power in the new multi-polar international order desired by Russia. In this context, the Eastern European region constitutes a natural area of operation for Russia – a historical field of its vital interests and exclusive influence, as well as an area subject to the policy of reintegration conducted by Russia.² What is more, the Russian Federation has its own definition of integration, different to that of the West. It is synonymous with a comprehensive reconstruction of Russian domination in the CIS region and a tightening of the strategic dependence of the states in the region on Russia, particularly in the field of economy and regional security. This process should thus not be compared with the integration taking place within the European Union, which by contrast is bottom-up and assumes a community of shared values and interests, voluntary accession and discounting of multilateral benefits.³ In addition, the treatment of the matter of the post-Soviet space as a priority in Russia's external politics is a result not only of geopolitical factors, but also cultural and historical ones,⁴ shared security interests, economic ties, the necessity to take care of the Russian diaspora, etc. Matters of prestige are also of exceptional importance for Russia, as manifested in the desire to play the role of a bridge between Asia and Europe. The Eastern Europe region additionally forms a permanent component of Russia's cultural identity. One symptom of this is the conviction held by Russians themselves that the lands of Great, Little and White Russia and Southern Caucasus, considered separate from the Western cultural ecumene, are indivisible. The importance of this region thus affects the very essence of Russianness and Russia's self-identification in its new spatial circumstances. In particular, Ukraine and Belarus, are considered by Russia to be a guarantee of its superpower status, as they form a natural frontier between East and West. It is those states which are seen as an integral part of Great Russia from a linguistic, ethno-cultural and historical point of view. This is why the policy towards the so-called 'near abroad' is based on the unwavering conviction that their independence should remain simply a temporary phenomenon.

It is also worth noticing that there is a shadow cast over Russia's relations with the EU by the superpower rhetoric and the policy of strongly preferring contacts with the large and powerful countries within the EU itself – Germany, France and Italy – while simultaneously ignoring its remaining member countries, particular those of the former Eastern bloc and the Baltic States. A dismissive and hostile attitude towards the integrational aspirations of the Eastern Europe states (particularly Ukraine) also dominates.⁵ Based on proper arrangements with the major European powers,

² Cf. Świder, 2015; Rotfeld, 2012.

³ Włodkowska, 2006.

⁴ Włodkowska, 2008: 139.

⁵ On the conflict of interests between the European Union and Russia in their shared neighbourhood see Haukkala, 2015; Youngs, 2017; Korosteleva, 2016.

the Russian Federation unscrupulously exploits the internal divisions within the EU, and treats them as a tool of political influence. In addition, mutual relations between the EU and Russia contain many elements connected with potential rivalry. Conflicts of interest arising between the politically expanding European Union, which is increasing its international involvement, and a Russia trying to maintain its former sphere of influence in Eastern Europe remain the best examples of this. It is this complex and ambivalent state of the relationships which influences the effectiveness of Russia's cooperation with the EU, although that cooperation is currently suspended anyway, due to the annexation of Crimea and ongoing conflict in Donbas (sanctions).⁶

Russian policy towards Ukraine after 24 February, and the migration crisis in Central Europe

Russia's armed conflict with Ukraine changed in February 2022. It was then that Russia launched a full-scale war against Ukraine. Against the Kremlin's expectations, the first days of the Russian offensive did not result in quick capitulation by Ukraine. The Ukrainian army put up effective resistance to the Russian forces, which experienced major losses in personnel and equipment. The Russians have not succeeded in gaining full control over key cities in Eastern and Central Ukraine. A number of Ukrainian cities continued to be targeted by massed rocket and artillery attacks and bombings. The defenders resisted Russian forces, but were unable to halt the Russian offensive. Attacks carried out on a large scale against civilian targets bear all the hallmarks of war crimes and crimes against humanity, and the International Criminal Court at the Hague has already initiated an investigation in this matter. The European Union and NATO provided assistance to Ukraine, while at the same time sanctions and an escalating boycott of Russia are being increasingly felt by the Russian economy and by ordinary citizens of the Russian Federation.

The failure of the offensive on several fronts led the Russian leadership in late March and early April to abandon the idea of occupying Kyiv, and to direct most of their forces towards the south and east of Ukraine. A war of manoeuvres gradually became a positional war. The Russian military applied scorched earth tactics, using massed artillery and missile bombardment to break the resistance of the Ukrainian army and to destroy civilian facilities and critical infrastructure. The change in strategy did not, however, bring the expected results. The Ukrainian armed forces put up fierce resistance at the cost of enormous losses, but nevertheless the Russian army moved systematically forward. Western support in the shape of ammunition and heavy equipment enabled the Ukrainians to gradually reduce the tempo of the Russian offensive, while thanks to new, accurate weaponry they managed to strike Russian arms stockpiles and command points with increasing effectiveness. This has led to

⁶ More on the significance of the sanctions see *Ćwiek-Karpowicz & Secieru, 2015.*

a systematic rise in Russian losses in personnel and equipment. A new stage of the Russian invasion commenced in April of this year, which aimed to occupy the entire Luhansk and Donetsk regions but did not prove effective. The Russian offensive lost impetus with each passing week, due to major losses and the low morale of the Russian soldiers fighting Ukrainian forces.

The Russians are continuing the strategy adopted in early April, attempting to use mass artillery and rocket bombardment to break the resistance of the Ukrainian military. As highly inaccurate weapons are often used, civilians often fall victim to the attacks. The resistance of the Ukrainian side, which halted the Russian offensive, would have been impossible without enormous mobilisation of society not only in Ukraine, but also in many other European countries. This allowed the accommodation of millions of internally displaced people and forced migrants fleeing the war, and large amounts of humanitarian aid to be provided to those needing it in Ukraine, as well as collections to be organised on various scales to buy military equipment for the Ukrainian armed forces. The most famous examples were the Bayraktar TB2 drones crowdfunded in Lithuania and Poland. Well-known charitable organisations got involved in humanitarian aid, including World Central Kitchen, the Polish Center for International Aid, Polish Humanitarian Action, the Polish Red Cross, Caritas, the Polish Medical Mission. Coordination centres were set up in many cities in Ukraine and the European Union to help refugees and support the Ukrainian military, the Ukrainian health service, etc.

The lack of visible Russian successes, massive losses in manpower and equipment, and the unprecedented sanctions have led the Kremlin authorities to soften their position and increasingly signal their readiness to start talks with Ukraine. The Russian Federation is counting on the approaching winter and problems with replacing Russian energy resources causing EU states to change their position and increase their readiness to make concessions to Russia. This would lead to a reduction in military, humanitarian and financial aid to Ukraine, and increase pressure by European politicians on the Ukrainian authorities to start negotiating with Russia and accept the Kremlin's conditions at least partially.

Instead of an ending: the Russian Federation's revisionism on the international stage⁷

The collapse of the bi-polar system has meant that a new type of order is currently forming. As Adam D. Rotfeld has noted, power and strength in international relations are dispersed and polycentric in nature. Meanwhile, the rules and norms agreed in the past reflect an international situation which no longer exists, and correspond to the previous situation. Norms and rules need to be adapted to the new

⁷ More on the topic see Stępniewski, 2015a: 153-166; Gerlach & Ryndzak, 2022: 17-29.

international reality shaped by new powers. A type of vacuum is thus created, which the new powers attempt to exploit. Hence we can currently observe the situation where Russia is attempting to unilaterally impose new rules of play on the world. Such a new game without rules is illustrated in the attempt to subjugate Ukraine to the standards of the Russian World.⁸

Autumn 2013 saw the start of protests in Ukraine known as the Euromaidan, which led to geopolitical changes in Eastern Europe,⁹ and indirectly to the outbreak of armed conflict between Russian and Ukraine. However it is difficult to understand the causes of the Ukrainian crisis without referring to the evolution of Russia's foreign policy and the way it has perceived international relations in recent years. Richard Sakwa considers that Russia's policy has recently evolved towards revisionism, which has led to the confrontation on the territory of Ukraine.¹⁰ The author believes that the change in Russian policy has at least four causes. Firstly, it was influenced by the gradual worsening of relations with the EU. Secondly, of key importance was the successive fragmentation of the Europe-wide security system in which Russia could operate as an autonomous partner in collaboration with the West. Thirdly, Russia and many more rising powers, such as China, were undermining American claims of exceptionalism and global leadership. Fourthly, one catalyst for Russian revisionism was the ideology of 'democratism', which differs from the practice of actual democracy. R. Sakwa thus considers that Russia is convinced that the promotion of democracy constitutes a cover for the West to realise its strategic goals.¹¹

With regard to the views of R. Sakwa, it can be assumed that revisionism does not mean an attempt to completely destroy the existing international order, but a desire for all the powers to adhere to the international rules of the game and to respect the equal status of Russia within the system.¹² Lilia Szewcowa, meanwhile, believes that Russia's anti-Western policy is influenced by several external factors: 1) the naivety of the West (it is generally considered that help given to Boris Yeltsin would lead to the democratisation of Russia); 2) collaboration with Russia at the cost of abandoning Western values (that liberal democracy ceased to be a role model for Russia is one of the most disastrous phenomena of the past 20 years); 3) Russia was unable to seize the opportunity after its defeat in the Cold War to transform into a state of law.¹³ In addition, Lilia Szewcowa considers that in relations between Russia and the liberal West, Vladimir Putin's policy is leading to a search for balance between cooperation and prevention. In her view, prevention has three dimensions: 1) preventing expansion of the West's geopolitical activities in Eurasia (slogans such

⁸ Cf. Rotfeld, 2014: 46.

⁹ For more on the topic see Ochmann & Wojas, 2016: 89-110; Grzebyk, 2014: 19-37; Stępniewski, 2015b: 11-25; Ekengren, 2018: 503-519.

¹⁰ Sakwa, 2015: 30.

¹¹ Sakwa, 2015: 31-34.

¹² Sakwa, 2015: 34.

¹³ Szewcowa, 2015.

as stop stationing NATO forces in Eastern Europe and the Baltic States, stop offering former-Soviet states EU membership); 2) inducing the West to accept the spheres of influence in that region; 3) blocking any channels of Western influence on Russia's internal affairs.¹⁴ Apart from the statements quoted above, there is an opinion which is rather commonly repeated not only among Russian politicians, but also Russian analysts, that Russian's revisionism in the international arena in recent years has resulted from the United States of America creating a 'unipolar world' and strengthening American hegemony in Europe. This is why Lilia Szewcowa rightly states that Russian decision-makers believe that

“the West should see Russia as a global power and recognise its energy interests, for example by granting guarantees to Gazprom or extending Nord Stream II. Russia additionally expects of the West that it will forget about the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas, and lift the sanctions for breaching the Minsk Agreement”.¹⁵

In conclusion, it may be stated that there is a discrepancy protocol between Russia and the European Union with regard to Eastern Europe (rivalry over the immediate neighbourhood, energy matters, the rules of economic cooperation, and also questions of democracy, human rights and civic freedoms). This raises the question of the place of Ukraine in this rivalry between the powers over the future balance of power in this part of Europe. In addition, can Russia's revisionism (with the participation of other powers, such as China) by means of the full-scale war in Ukraine, and previously in Syria, lead to the appearance of a post-unipolar international order?

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¹⁴ Szewcowa, 2015.

¹⁵ On the Minsk I and Minsk II agreements in more detail see Stępniewski, 2016; Piskorska, 2016: 223, 242-243.

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To cite this article: Stępniewski, T., (2022). Russia's war with Ukraine and Russia's revisionism on the international stage. *Historia i Świat* 11, 329-336, DOI: 10.34739/his.2022.11.19



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