

THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR AND THE FUTURE OF EUROPEAN SECURITY

Even though it is a common narrative that the Russian aggression revived the unity of Europe and filled the existence of NATO with a totally new meaning, it also brought to the surface those issues that were held under the carpet for decades and raised questions that needed to be addressed and, if not solved immediately, at least, should be discussed and kept on the agenda.

István Íjgyártó

*Chief Advisor, Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, Budapest, Hungary
Former Ambassador of Hungary to Bucharest (2000-2004), Moscow (2010-2014), and Kyiv (2018-2023)*

The world order that was based on mutually recognized rules seems to have come to an end. The Russo-Ukrainian war shocked the world but also raised the question of the effectiveness of international law and the European security architecture. Even though it is a common narrative that the Russian aggression revived the unity of Europe and filled the existence of NATO with a totally new meaning, it also brought to the surface those issues that were held under the carpet for decades and raised questions that needed to be addressed and, if not solved immediately, at least, should be discussed and kept on the agenda.

The following study aims to give a brief on the turbulent events of the last decades that have had a significant impact on the stability of the recognized order, with special regard to the relations between the West and Russia in terms of continental cooperation and global security matters. With this in regard, the paper addresses the questions of European policies on security, attitudes towards Ukraine and Russia, and the issue of different views on the extension of the European Union. Elaborating on the above, the study aims to formulate possible visions of the future of European security under the circumstances of turbulences in the global order.

The European Security and Its Fragile Nature

Due to the ongoing fighting, it is impossible yet to predict the consequences of the Russo-Ukrainian war - or

“special military operation” in the Russian narrative and “full-fledged invasion of Ukraine” in the Western one. This confrontation, however, is a new milestone in the process of constant deterioration of relations between the West and Russia since 2014 Russian interference in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, accelerating the transformation of the perception of global and regional security worldwide. The two Armenian-Azerbaijani wars in 2020 and 2023 around the province of Karabakh and the Russian invasion in Ukraine also pointed out that war, as a possible tool of ‘conflict resolution’ has returned to Europe.

This ended an era characterized by a newly found optimism to set a new world order – or at least a new European one – after the collapse of Communist rule in Central and Eastern Europe and the end of the Cold War. 34 heads of state and governments gathered in the French capital to declare their will to formulate new principles of international relations and their endeavor for the reunification of the European continent. As the text of the Charter of Paris, adopted during the Summit, stated: “... In accordance with our obligations under the Charter of the United Nations and commitments under the Helsinki Final Act, we renew our pledge to refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any State, or from acting in any other manner inconsistent with the principles or purposes of those documents. We recall that non-compliance with obligations under the Charter of the United Nations constitutes a violation of international law...”¹



The optimism aimed at establishing long-lasting peace and security on the European continent proved not to be sufficient enough to prevent such later conflicts, like the civil war in former Yugoslavia and the armed conflict between Georgia and the Russian Federation, but international instruments like the Organization of European Security and Cooperation (OSCE) still had the necessary power and authority to successfully de-escalate and end hostilities. The document adopted by the Astana Summit of the OSCE in 2010 stated: "...We are determined to work together to fully realize the vision of a comprehensive, cooperative, and indivisible security community throughout our shared OSCE area. This security community should be aimed at meeting the challenges of the 21st century and based on our full adherence to common OSCE norms, principles, and commitments across all three dimensions. It should unite all OSCE participating States across the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian region, free of dividing lines, conflicts, spheres of influence and zones with different levels of security..."²

It is worth noting that despite her interference in Georgia and the subsequent cooling down in Russian-Western relations, Moscow was among the signatory parties. The Russian attitude could be explained by the fact that at the NATO Bucharest Summit of 2008 neither Ukraine nor Georgia received a firm commitment or deadline for membership, only a rather obscure promise

for the future.³ Later the Obama administration declared its willingness for 'reset' in the Russo-American relations and the EU – led by Germany – also started working hard to engage Russia and the post-Soviet space.

Events of the Ukrainian 'Euromaidan' in Kyiv and the separatist developments in Crimea and the Donbas region, followed by Russia's military actions triggered immediate and harsh reactions from the West, but the successful accomplishment of signing the Minsk Agreements and a more or less effective localization of armed clashes in Eastern Ukraine demonstrated that some life remained in international mediation.

The Russian offensive against Ukraine on 24 February 2022 and the subsequent and unprecedented unity of the Western countries behind Kyiv made it evident, that European unification and establishing a common economic and security space 'from Lisbon to Vladivostok' is out of the agenda for a foreseeable future. Moreover, the massive disregard for internationally adopted rules and principles by Moscow basically disabled international institutions from playing their traditional role as neutral mediators in such conflicts.⁴ The West could convince only some 50 countries to join in sanctioning Russia and important large economies kept their distance from the conflict. Although non-violation of the basic principles of the UN Charter, like sovereignty and territorial integrity of states are cornerstone issues for most members

The optimism aimed at establishing long-lasting peace and security on the European continent proved not to be sufficient enough to prevent such later conflicts, like the civil war in former Yugoslavia and the armed conflict between Georgia and the Russian Federation, but international instruments like the Organization of European Security and Cooperation (OSCE) still had the necessary power and authority to successfully de-escalate and end hostilities.

of the international community, condemning Russia in the UN Council is not an automatism for member states anymore. Many countries regard the Russo-Ukrainian war rather as a regional conflict or part of a certain geopolitical rivalry between “the West and the rest” and prefer to focus on their own challenges and problems. A forming Global South with such influential players like India, Brazil, Egypt, Indonesia or Saudi-Arabia would like to see more of its own influence over global developments as a consequence of the re-shaping international relations rather than risking mutually beneficial relations with one of the nuclear powers of the world.

Notwithstanding the fact that almost each and every leadership of the European Union has raised the necessity for the EU to be a more significant geopolitical player in world politics, Brussels is still struggling with how to manage the greatest challenge for European security so far: the Russo-Ukrainian war.

The Impact of the Russo-Ukrainian War on the EU Policies

After the ‘big bang’ enlargement in 2004, followed by the accession of Romania and Bulgaria, the EU became a direct neighbor of the post-Soviet space, including Russia and Ukraine. While the EU has always had ambitious and attractive plans designed to bring its Eastern neighbors closer to European values and principles, one had an impression that from a geopolitical perspective, these countries were considered to be rather buffers than potential future candidates for European integration. Policies towards these countries were carefully tuned not to disturb EU-Russia relations. Even the 2014 Euromaidan and developments triggered by it did not really change this approach: the EU introduced sanctions, but in a limited scope, contributed to the conclusion of the Minsk Agreements and provided a wide range of

support for the reform process, but strictly within the framework of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement.⁵

The full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine changed everything significantly. For most of the EU, it became something more, than simply a war. It symbolizes that

- The West was unable to incorporate Russia into the European architecture of peace;
- European Neighbourhood Policy became a failure not being able to gradually integrate its Eastern neighbors;⁶
- by providing an opportunity for Ukraine to sign the Association Agreement in 2014, the EU basically took responsibility for the fate of the country thus imposing itself in the middle of a game for conquest between the West and Russia in Eastern Europe.

In the eyes of Brussels, the Russian invasion turned Ukraine from a buffer state into a border state. Ukraine de facto has become ‘the defender of the Union’ – if the country falls, Eastern Member States might turn into direct targets for further Russian expansion. The war swept away traditional *Ostpolitik-thinking*, being a guiding principle of German foreign policy - and consequently EU’s foreign relations - for so many chancellors from Willy Brant to Angela Merkel. Polish and Baltic fears concerning European security challenged from the East became dominant and as the war went on, European politicians tended to see developments more and more through ‘Ukrainian glasses.’⁷ Ukraine, not having the slightest chance to be considered as a candidate country before the war, was granted this status in 2022 and in December 2023, the Council of the European Union decided to launch official negotiations aiming at membership. Obviously, by this step the EU has not appreciated Ukraine’s exceptional integration efforts but rather her heroic defense against Russian invasion, providing also a certain compensation for the – again - postponed invitation to NATO at the Vilnius Summit of 2023.

The euphoria around supporting Ukraine’s accession should not cover the fact that membership of Ukraine in the EU puts enormous political, financial, and institutional stress on the Union:

- Ukraine should be assisted not only in the preparation for membership but the country needs to be rebuilt – war damage estimated to extend up to some 700 billion dollars and counting;
- Candidate countries from the Western Balkans have been waiting for accession for something like

twenty years – keeping them waiting further while Ukraine is given a chance for rapid, politically motivated integration might generate serious tensions and undermine the EU's credibility;

- Since such a large integration is not covered by the EU budget, the need for additional financial resources will turn many 'old' members and almost all Eastern European member states from supported country to net contributor – generating serious internal political tensions in the countries concerned;
- French and German plans aiming at institutional reforms within the EU have already generated serious opposition – suppressing this by referring to the need for a more flexible decision-making mechanism to accelerate Ukraine's accession might undermine unity within the Union;
- Membership of Ukraine will have a serious impact on everything: the size of the Commission and the European Parliament, the future of cohesion policies and common agriculture, etc.

These are the issues the member states should comprehensively discuss before any further enlargement decisions.⁸

What's Next? Enhancing the EU's Strategic Autonomy

Under the shock of witnessing the collapse of its neighborhood policy, the EU, while setting up a narrative of some 'positive' outcomes of the Russo-Ukrainian war, favors such arguments that the Russian aggression generated an unprecedented unity among members, or more widely, within the Western world; helped ironing contradictions between the EU and NATO; relaxed post-Brexit tensions with London. However, Brussels and European leaders would face soon another serious challenge: America stepping back from the support of Ukraine exponentially will increase Europe's burden and responsibility for the outcome of the war. In the meantime, a new US approach towards her role in European security would require renewed thinking on establishing European 'strategic autonomy.'

The issue of enhancing the EU's own defense capabilities surfaced sooner than the emergence of threats from Russia. The preface of the EU Strategic Compass adopted in 2022– a paper summarizing possible challenges and responses states: "We live in a world shaped by raw power politics, where everything is weaponized and where we face a fierce battle of narratives." The document also enumerates several





symptoms of a disintegrating order, including “the instrumentalization of migrants, the privatization of armies, the politicization of the control of sensitive technologies . . . the dynamics of state failure, the retreat of democratic freedoms as well as attacks on the ‘global commons’ of cyberspace, the high seas and outer space.”⁹

A proper answer to these very much realistic and existing dangers and challenges would be establishing an international crisis-management facility within the Common Security and Defence Policy of the EU, as a core of it. Through this, the Union would be able to tackle and settle an erupting conflict in an autonomous way (We should not forget i.e. that the conflict in Gaza is taking place in the EU’s Southern Neighbourhood, with hardly foreseeable endgame and outcomes yet).

The next step towards strategic autonomy is to create military independence of the EU. This would guarantee security within and beyond the borders of the EU by military capabilities, based on autonomous and competitive industrial and technological capacities for European defense – with significantly more independence from the US and NATO, than the existing one. This

Many countries regard the Russo-Ukrainian war rather as a regional conflict or part of a certain geopolitical rivalry between “the West and the rest” and prefer to focus on their own challenges and problems.

could be developed in the widest possible sense towards a defense policy with full independence in areas of commerce, investment, and finance. The only problem with these ideas is that the EU has neither capacities nor institutions yet to meet these requirements.¹⁰

The birth of the EU Strategic Compass and ongoing discussion around the strategic autonomy of Europe, taking into consideration numerous lessons to be learned from the Russo-Ukrainian war are encouraging signs for the future. But we also should note, that:

- The continuous presence of the US defense umbrella over Europe generated a fake conviction of security: full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine made it evident that even a country with a well-equipped, well-trained, and numerically large army can face serious problems in performing durable resistance;
- US attention can turn away from Europe and Americans, challenged by their problems and guided by their own interests, have a legitimate expectation from their European allies to properly boost their defense capabilities – especially under such volatile and unpredictable conditions where conflicts can erupt almost everywhere and any time;
- Without arguing that US presence in Europe is indispensable, it is a legitimate endeavor from the EU to reject the role of a subordinate and seek its interests within the partnership with traditional allies;

- The EU should work further to develop a mechanism assessing individual member states' achievements on military reforms and developments for a future European armed force and to take the first steps towards creating operational command units, inter-operational and quick-response troop bases to properly reinforce its Common Security and Defense Policy.

Conclusions

The Russo-Ukrainian war caused significant changes in European and global security perceptions. The policymakers of the EU and the West in general aligned together in order to provide all the necessary support for Ukraine in terms of weaponry, finance, and policies. This indeed was enough to keep Ukraine standing so far, but not necessarily enough to save her. There is a clear hope that Ukraine will win, yet the way how to achieve it is still opaque. The question, however, of what kind of Ukraine Europe would inherit was hardly even raised.

As of today, neither of the parties in this tragic conflict show any intention to end hostilities in the foreseeable

The birth of the EU Strategic Compass and ongoing discussion around the strategic autonomy of Europe, taking into consideration numerous lessons to be learned from the Russo-Ukrainian war are encouraging signs for the future.

future. A freezing conflict is not an option for Ukraine and Russia would like to avoid even the slightest appearance of defeat. The West is ready to support Ukraine as long as it is requested by her. Meanwhile, sooner or later it will be necessary to introduce some moderation, recommendations for exit strategies, etc. to close the most disastrous armed conflict since World War II in Europe. If it is true that we are entering a new era of great power competition and our "traditional" challenges – illegal migration, climate change, terrorism – will constantly jeopardize our security, it is imperative to strengthen defense capacities on a national level. At the same time, it is also very important to further improve the EU's readiness to be one of the main factors of European security.

Endnotes

- 1 Charter of Paris for a New Europe 1990.
- 2 Astana Commemorative Declaration. Towards a security Community. OSCE 2010.
- 3 Bucharest Summit Declaration. Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Bucharest on 3 April 2008.
- 4 Balázs Jarábik: Break Point. Scenarios and regional implications of the Russo-Ukrainian war. iwm.at/europes-futures/publication/break-point-scenarios-and-regional-implications-of-the-russo-ukrainian
- 5 Sven Biscop: War for Ukraine and the rediscovery of Geopolitics. Must the EU draw New Battleline or keep an open door? Egmont Paper 123. Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations. June 2023.
- 6 Reinhard Krumm: The legacy of Europe's Eastern policy: insufficient engagement or influence. In.: Europe and the war in Ukraine. From Russian aggression to a new Eastern policy. Edited by László Andor and Uwe Optenhögel. Foundation for European Progressive Studies. Brussels, May 2023. pp. 27-39.
- 7 Jarábik 2023. ibidem
- 8 Carlo Bastasin: Want Ukraine in the EU? You'll have to reform the EU, too. Brookings July 2023
- 9 Stefan Lehne: After Russia's war against Ukraine: What kind of World Order? Carnegie Europe 28.02.2023
- 10 Christos Katsioulis: The end of strategic autonomy as we know it. In.: Europe and the war in Ukraine. From Russian aggression to a new Eastern policy. Edited by László Andor and Uwe Optenhögel. Foundation for European Progressive Studies. Brussels, May 2023. pp. 39-51.