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## **The Challenges of Ukraine's European Choice in the Context of the Kremlin's Neo-Imperialist Policies During Volodymyr Zelenskyy's Presidency**

### **Abstract**

This article attempts to analyse the situation in Ukraine in the face of ongoing Russian aggression and increasing pressure from the Kremlin towards Eastern European states. The armed conflict taking place in Ukraine means that the geostrategic situation of Eastern Europe has changed. In this context, the Eastern Partnership, which was meant to be one of the key instruments shaping international relations with the states neighbouring the EU in the East, is quite often seen as an ineffective or even obsolete tool. There can be no doubt that the greatest problem for the Eastern Partnership is that the project is seen in geopolitical categories – thinking of the countries of the Eastern Partnership in the context of the necessity for them to choose between the European Union and Russia (listening to statements by the EU's political decision-makers, it can often seem that those states have no other option). The key research question is whether we will be dealing with an assertive EU policy in tandem with current US policy, or whether there will be another reset in relations between the West and the Russian Federation.

**Keywords:** Ukraine, Russia, Donbas, Eastern Neighbourhood, Security

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## Introduction

2014 was a year of diametric change in the geostrategic situation in the Eastern vicinity of the European Union. Russian aggression aimed at halting Ukraine's pro-Western ambitions brought about a hitherto unseen consolidation of Ukrainian society,<sup>1</sup> and created a new civilisational opportunity by marginalising the political influences of the Russian Federation and increasing support for closer relations with western structures. One fundamental problem, however, is the lethargic pace of the post-Maidan government, which enjoys such a large social mandate. Disappointment with the government of Petr Poroshenko and his political backers led to the victory of a politician from outside the system in the form of famous comedian Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Along with his Servant of the People grouping, he took on a task which no previous Ukrainian politician had ever succeeded in; he announced that the conflict with the Russian Federation would be settled, key economic and political reforms swiftly implemented, and Ukraine's efforts to join the European Union and North Atlantic Alliance intensified.

2019 saw intensive activity with regard to settling the conflict in Donbas. The attempt at a new opening in Russian-Ukrainian relations, initiated by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as part of the Normandy Format, did not bring about any spectacular results. This was mainly due to the tough line taken by the new president's administration, which did not agree to a settlement of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine based on the proposals from the Russian Federation involving the vague "Steinmeier formula", which was an attempt to interpret the Minsk agreements in a way which benefits the decision-making centre of the Kremlin.

2020 brought a range of major changes to Ukraine's geostrategic position, including an exacerbation of the situation in Belarus and the presidential elections in the USA. Joseph Biden Jr.'s victory caused concern for the continuation of the new president's tough policy towards Russia. Some Ukrainian analysts and politicians saw the danger of a return to the "reset" policy in relations with the Russian Federation and a cessation of military aid. These fears turned out to be unjustified; Biden maintained – to a significant degree – his predecessor's policy in this area, and openly criticised the authorities at the Kremlin led by Vladimir Putin. At the same time, he clearly articulated his demands towards Ukraine, insisting on an acceleration of political and economic reforms and an escalation

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<sup>1</sup> More about Ukrainian society and Ukraine-Russia relations in terms of identity see: O. Onuch, H.E. Hale, *Capturing Identity: The Case of Ukraine*, "Post-Soviet Affairs", vol. 34(2–3)/2018; A. Wilson, *Ukraine's Orange Revolution*, New Haven 2005; S. Yekelchuk, *Ukraine: Birth of a Modern Nation*, Oxford 2007.

of the fight against corruption. The removal of sanctions against entities involved in building Nord Stream 2, and the Putin-Biden summit, seriously worried the Ukrainian authorities, who fear the political effects of the new gas pipeline being constructed under the Baltic. The current situation on Europe's natural gas market, complicated by Russian limits on westward gas supplies, shows how dangerous it would be to increase energy dependence on the Russian Federation.

The processes mentioned will shape the European Union's policy towards the Eastern Europe region and the Russian Federation itself. The key research question is whether we will be dealing with an assertive EU policy in tandem with the current US policy, or whether there will be another reset in relations between the West and the Russian Federation.

This article attempts to analyse the situation in Ukraine in conditions of ongoing Russian aggression<sup>2</sup> and increasing pressure from the Kremlin on Eastern European states. The armed conflict taking place in Ukraine means that the geostrategic situation of Eastern Europe has changed. In this context, the Eastern Partnership, which was meant to be one of the key instruments shaping international relations with the states neighbouring the EU in the East, is quite often seen as an ineffective or even obsolete tool. In 2017, the European Union marked the sixtieth anniversary of an unprecedented event in European history – the signing of the Treaty of Rome. In spite of the difficulties which the EU is currently experiencing (such as the migration crisis and Brexit), it continues to be an area of wealth and security, attracting millions of people who wish to tie their future to this region. The main question, however, is whether it will still be capable in the new circumstances of being actively involved in its Eastern policy.

## **Eastern Europe Between the Eurasian Economic Union and the European Union**

The neo-imperial policies of the Russian Federation, a multifaceted hybrid war with Ukraine, and the increasing political and economic pres-

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<sup>2</sup> *Security dilemma in the Black Sea region in light of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict*, eds. O. Polegkyi, T. Stepniewski, "IEŚ Policy Papers", no. 5/2021, <https://ies.lublin.pl/ies-policy-papers/security-dilemma-in-the-black-sea-region-in-light-of-the-russian-ukrainian-conflict> (access 22.11.2021); *Conflict in Donbas: Endless negotiations and (im) possible solutions*, eds. O. Polegkyi, T. Stepniewski, "IEŚ Policy Papers", no. 5/2020, <https://ies.lublin.pl/ies-policy-papers/20-05-conflict-in-donbas-endless-negotiations-and-im-possible-solutions> (access 21.10.2021); J.M. Fiszer, T. Stepniewski, K. Świder, *Polska, Ukraina, Białoruś, Rosja. Obraz politycznej dynamiki regionu*, Instytut Studiów Politycznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk, Warszawa 2019; A. Racz, *Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine Breaking the Enemy's Ability to Resist*, "FIIA Report", no. 43/2017.

sure on Belarus constitute a serious challenge in terms of the general security of the Central-Eastern Europe region. Russia is increasingly open about its plans, and is consistently striving to implement them. Against this background, European Union policy seems conservative, although the efforts of the European Community aimed at stabilising the situation in the region should be appreciated. One of the instruments used for this purpose is the Eastern Partnership programme. In the opinion of the European Union's European External Action Service (EEAS), the Eastern Partnership is a mature project.<sup>3</sup> Although it is losing dynamics and is currently being realised under specific conditions, it should be remembered that the resolutions of the Vilnius and Riga summits are being successfully implemented. The multilateral platforms are functioning, and meetings are being held at various levels. These meetings may be low profile, but they do take place and affect the situation of states in the region to a greater or lesser degree.

There can be no doubt that the greatest problem for the Eastern Partnership is that the project is seen in geopolitical categories – thinking of the countries of the Eastern Partnership in the context of the necessity for them to choose between the European Union and Russia (listening to statements by EU political decision-makers, it can often seem that those states have no other option). When Poland and Sweden created the project, however, they did not assume that the countries included in it would have to make such a choice.<sup>4</sup> A choice, incidentally, which is exceptionally difficult for those countries and involves many complications – in Ukraine's case, these are currently difficulties of an existential nature. It is obvious that the most effective policy is that which is accompanied by the perspective of membership in European Union structures. A lack of such perspective leaves the EU with no instruments to pressure those states.<sup>5</sup> But neither should it be forgotten that the states of the Eastern Partnership are, at present, not ready for European integration, taking into account almost every membership criterion. In addition, not all the countries covered by the programme show any desire to integrate. While Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine are implementing the AA/DCFTA ne-

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<sup>3</sup> Interview 1, European External Action Service (EEAS), Headquarters Brussels; Russia Division, 15 September 2016.

<sup>4</sup> The Eastern Partnership was inaugurated by the European Union during a summit in Prague on 7 May 2009. The EP is an EU project aimed at six of its eastern neighbours – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

<sup>5</sup> Interview 2 and 3, The Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Helsinki, 22 November 2021; Interview 4, European External Action Service (EEAS), Headquarters Brussels; Eastern Partnership, regional cooperation and OSCE, 15 September 2016.

gotiated with the European Union, Armenia and Belarus have joined the Eurasian Economic Union, and Azerbaijan remains in limbo between the two integration blocs. Another serious problem is the internal divisions within individual states of Eastern Europe. Such divisions create social tension, often exacerbated by Russian propaganda.<sup>6</sup>

Bearing in mind the situation of the Eastern Partnership states, the best solution for the European Union is to stress pragmatism, flexibility, and a search for opportunities to collaborate. Of course, the policies of the European Communities should still be based on the principal of “more for more”, which applies in the European Neighbourhood Policy.<sup>7</sup> The European Union should also pursue a “less for less” policy. An example of such pragmatic action is the support for reforms in Eastern Partnership states. The success of such transformations in those countries, however, depends on the effectiveness of the states themselves. If reforms cannot be carried out, it will be difficult to talk of any deepening of relations between the European Union and countries of the Eastern Partnership. It should, however, be stated clearly that the European Union cannot conduct the reforms for those countries aspiring to membership. They must strive for those changes themselves, and bear the resulting costs. Wishing to stimulate the transformation process, the European Communities should involve much greater financial resources in ameliorating adverse changes, while also extending an offer of expert help.<sup>8</sup>

The systemic conditions inherited from the Soviet period constitute a key problem. There exists nepotism, incompetence, a lack of a state ethos, and corruption (one example is Moldova, wherein large amounts of EU funds have been embezzled in recent years). In Ukraine, the oligarchic

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<sup>6</sup> A. Moshes, R. Nizhnikau, *Three decades of Russian policy in the European part of the post-Soviet space: Swimming against the current*, “FIIA Briefing Paper”, no. 321/2021, [www.fiaa.fi](http://www.fiaa.fi) (access 18.11.2021); M.H. van Herpen, *Putin's Propaganda Machine. Soft Power and Russian Foreign Policy*, Lanham–New York–London 2016, pp. 19–33.

<sup>7</sup> M. Popowski, Deputy Director-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), European Commission), during a panel discussion entitled “Money in Politics: State-building, democracy and corruption in the Eastern Neighbourhood”, European Endowment for Democracy and the Office of International IDEA, Brussels, 16 September 2016.

<sup>8</sup> More about EU policy towards Eastern Europe and Russia: M. Siddi, *National Identities and Foreign Policy in the European Union. The Russia Policy of Germany, Poland and Finland*, London–New York–London 2017; T. Forsberg, H. Haukkala, *The European Union and Russia*, London, New York 2016, pp. 44–74, see also: K. Raik, *Key Actors in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood Competing perspectives on geostrategic tensions*, eds. K. Raik, S. Saari, “FIIA Report”, no. 47/2016, [https://www.fiaa.fi/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/report47\\_key\\_actors\\_in\\_the\\_eus\\_eastern\\_neighbourhood.pdf](https://www.fiaa.fi/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/report47_key_actors_in_the_eus_eastern_neighbourhood.pdf) (access 10.10.2021).

system is a serious obstacle to pro-Western reform. After a period of collapse caused by Russian aggression, the economy is slowly heating back up. In 2015, Ukraine's GDP decreased by 9.7%, in 2016 it rose by 2.4%, then in 2020 fell by 4.02%,<sup>9</sup> as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The World Bank considers that the reforms are too slow, and the weakness of external demand and the conflict with Russia are destroying economic upturn in Ukraine. According to calculations by experts from the organisation, if the current pace of reform is maintained, it will take Ukraine 50 years to reach Poland's current level of development. Without external assistance, Ukraine will not be able to cope with the scale of the problems and with the war with Russia in Donbas.<sup>10</sup>

Another matter is visa liberalisation. While Moldova became subject to visa-free travel in 2014, it took Ukraine until 2017. It did already meet all the requirements placed on it by the EU, but the decision was delayed. Georgia was also added the same year. The delay was due to the preparation of a suspension mechanism in the event of violations of obligations by countries covered by visa-free travel in the EU. Ukraine's inclusion in the visa-free travel programme should be treated as a great success for that country, which currently does not control the entirety of its own territory, considering that Crimea was annexed by Russia and that there is a war in Donbas. It is worth stressing that the pessimistic forecasts of mass abuses of the visa-free programme by citizens of Eastern Europe did not come true.<sup>11</sup>

From the point of view of the effectiveness of EU policy towards the countries of Eastern Europe, it is exceptionally important that the societies in those countries do not become hostages of the political situation, and that citizens have the possibility to travel into EU territory, particularly as the European Communities stress "people-to-people contact" with regard to the region. In addition, the European Union should provide even more support to civil society, young politicians and political leaders, a free media, and small-and-medium-sized businesses. It seems unlikely that the political systems in those countries will change in the immediate future, so civil society and grassroots initiatives should be supported. It was the social rebellion against Viktor Yanukovich's regime,

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<sup>9</sup> The World Bank Data, *Ukraine*, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=UA> (access 10.01.2020).

<sup>10</sup> *Ukraine. Special Focus Note Tapping Ukraine's Growth Potential*, 23.05.2019, The World Bank, <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/927141558601581077/Ukraine-Special-Focus-Note-Spring-2019-en.pdf> (access 10.01.2020).

<sup>11</sup> O. Kapranov, *The Framing of the EU Visa Liberalization with Ukraine*, "Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica", vol. 10, no. 3/2018, pp. 97–115.

the so-called Revolution of Dignity, which brought about immeasurable change in Ukraine's political situation in 2014, so it is clear that the civic potential of Ukraine – and to a lesser degree in other countries in Eastern Europe – is significant, and the decision-makers in EU Member States should remember this.<sup>12</sup>

Ukraine is bearing the enormous cost of economic and political reforms, which is being felt by society. Russian aggression has caused a drop in the standard of living, resulted in mass economic migration to the European Union, and, in the east of the country, claims more victims practically daily. A lack of effectiveness in state reform and the distant perspective of integration with the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance may discourage Ukrainian citizens from integrating with Western structures, which may lead to a repetition of the scenario which followed the Orange Revolution, when the pro-European elite was removed from power by pro-Russian circles led by Viktor Yanukovich and the Party of Regions. The first worrying signal which may suggest a consolidation of the pro-Russian circles is the good results achieved by the Opposition Platform – For Life in local authority elections in Ukraine in 2020. The European Union should bear this in mind when developing its action strategy with regard to Ukraine.

### **The Russian Federation's Neo-Imperial Policy Toward Ukraine**

Over the last three decades, we have witnessed an intensification of steps taken in the post-Soviet sphere by the authorities at the Kremlin aimed at rebuilding its dominant political position. From the point of view of the situation of Eastern European states, it is vitally important to analyse realistic geopolitical assumptions rather than political declarations. The key is to recognise strategic as well as tactical goals. Sergei Karaganov, a well-known Russian analyst who often appears in Western media, has frequently stated that Russia will never be a global power until it becomes a regional power. This is why most analysts believe that Ukraine plays a fundamental role in the Russian Federation's neo-power projects.<sup>13</sup> Russia could, of course, become a regional power and play a key

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<sup>12</sup> Wider: A. Moshes, R. Nizhnikau, *Ukraine's half-hearted reforms: What needs to change in the West's approach?*, "FIIA Briefing Paper", no. 307/2021, www.fiaa.fi (access 18.11.2021); *Ukraina. Czas przemian po rewolucji godności*, ed. A. Furier, Fince, Poznań 2017.

<sup>13</sup> C.R. Saivetz, *The Ties that Bind? Russia's Evolving Relations with its Neighbors*, "Communist and Post-Communist Studies", vol. 45/2013, pp. 402–405.

role in world politics in the future, but the war with Ukraine, the violation of its territorial integrity, the solidarity of the Western response, and the economic recession resulting from the conflict all call into question whether Russia can achieve those aims.

It can be said that since the very start of the war between Russia and Ukraine (a hybrid or proxy war), the Russian Federation has strived to destabilise the situation in the southern and eastern parts of the country in order to remove or occupy them, or to form a quasi-state (*casus Transnistria*). This situation is playing out in the direct vicinity of countries of the Visegrad Group, and thus directly affects the security of Central Europe.<sup>14</sup> It is worth stressing, however, that the annexation of Crimea and the pro-Russian separatism in Donbas have not altered the pro-Western course of Ukraine, so it seems justified to conclude that Russia has achieved the most it could by violating the territorial integrity of Ukraine. In the first months of the war, a vast number of dismantled machines were removed from occupied factories, and all the mines and most of the key businesses were taken over. Hundreds of thousands of people left for Russia in search of safety. Many of them remained and found work there. At the same time, it is worth stressing that there is no indication of any radical limiting of Russian influence in Donbas in the coming years.<sup>15</sup> The Kremlin authorities are in full control of the region. Ukraine must realise this when pushing through a new plan to settle the situation in the east of the country.

One priority of the current Ukrainian government is to end the armed conflict in Donbas, in line with social expectations. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has many times raised the matter of settling the Donbas situation, resulting in provisional acceptance by the governments of the Normandy Four states of the so-called Steinmeier formula at a meeting in Minsk on 1st October 2019, and also the decision to call another summit in the Normandy format in Paris on 9th December 2019.

Ukraine's President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, has clearly outlined his main priorities and expectations connected with the Paris summit. Foremost among these, apart from the aforementioned cessation of hostilities, are the matters of releasing Ukrainian prisoners of war according to an

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<sup>14</sup> T. Stepniewski, *The European Union and Eastern Partnership: Crises and Strategic Assessment*, "Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej", no. 14(5)/2016, pp. 337–344.

<sup>15</sup> M. Kacwicz, *Rozdając paszporty w Donbasie Rosja może zamrozić konflikt na lata*, Belsat, 25.04.2012, <https://belsat.eu/pl/news/rozdajac-paszporty-w-donbasie-rosja-moze-zamrozic-konflikt-na-lata/> (access 10.01.2020); see also: O. Lutsevych, *Agents of the Russian world: proxy groups in the contested neighbourhood*, "Research Paper", Chatham House The Royal Institute of International Affairs, April 2016.

all-for-all formula, restoring control of the country's eastern border, removing all armies, and organising local-government elections. Without this, it will be impossible to give Donbas special status. As the recent years have shown, none of these proposals have been realised.

The Russian Federation has continued its previous narrative, distancing itself from the events in Eastern Ukraine and treating them as an internal conflict in which Russia has no direct involvement. This is testified by the words of Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov who, on the eve of the summit, suggested that talks with representatives of the self-styled people's republics would be necessary to establish lasting peace in Donbas.<sup>16</sup> However, the key geostrategic goal is to maintain the *status quo* in Donbas, and, as a result, to further destabilise Ukraine and damage its image on the international stage.

Finalising talks on the transit of Russian gas through Ukraine was a major achievement of the Ukrainian government. A five-year gas contract was signed on 30th December, safeguarding the flow of gas through the country's territory. In 2020, the amount of gas piped was to be a minimum of 65bn m<sup>3</sup>, and a further 40bn m<sup>3</sup> the following years. The main question remains, of course, whether the Russian Federation will honour the signed agreement after full activation of Nord Stream 2. Another undeniable success was executing the compensation as ruled for by the Arbitration Tribunal in Stockholm, totalling US\$2.92bn, paid by Russia on 27th December 2019. From a Ukrainian point of view, the possibility of a virtual gas reverse in a new contract was also important. Ukraine can buy up gas piped through its territory to Poland or Slovakia, without the need for it to be physically pumped from those countries.<sup>17</sup>

The necessity to sign a gas contract with Ukraine arises from delays in the construction of Nord Stream 2. This does not mean that Russia has abandoned its geostrategic goals with regard to Ukraine, however. This is clear from its activity during the Munich Security Conference in February 2020. The 12-step project developed by the Russian Foreign Ministry in collaboration with Western experts, but not consulted with Ukraine, was an extremely dangerous initiative. The document made no mention of Russian responsibility for the aggression against Ukraine and annexation of Crimea. It combined actions taken earlier which raised no objections in the fields of security, the economy, humanitarian aid, and

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<sup>16</sup> Кремль на "нормандской встрече" хочет подбить Зеленского к прямым переговорам с боевиками (Kreml na "normandskoi vstreche" khochet podbit Zelenskogo k priamym peregovoram s boevikami), УНИАН, 27.11.2019.

<sup>17</sup> Ukrainian GTS operator launches virtual gas reverse flow from Poland, UNIAN, 24.01.2020.

political dialogue between Russia and the West, with surprising and worrying proposals. The most controversial were steps 8 and 12, with the former encouraging the production of a road map for lifting the sanctions placed on the Russian Federation, along with a gradual implementation of the Minsk agreements. This proposal did not take into account the fact that the sanctions are a punishment applied to Russia for the aggression against Ukraine and help the authorities in Kyiv to withstand pressure from the Kremlin. Agreement to the partial lifting of sanctions in return for an incomplete implementation of the Minsk agreements may hinder their realisation. Step 12, meanwhile, is an unacceptable attempt to legitimise Russia's blatant interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state. The vague "activation of a new dialogue on identity" which raises questions of history, national memory, language, identity, and the experiences of minorities, with the participation of Russia, Poland, and Hungary, is in line with the Russian narrative about the persecution of Russian-speakers in Ukraine which supposedly resulted in "civil war".

The Ukrainian side firmly rejected the 12-step plan. It is worth noting that one of the people behind the Munich plan was Dmitry Kozak, deputy head of the president's administration and specialist in frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet region. He was also one of the founders of the project to appoint a Consultative Council during a meeting of the Trilateral Contact Group (TCG) for settling the Donbas conflict on 11th March 2020 (it includes representatives of Ukraine, Russia, the separatists, and the OSCE). The controversial idea involved the weight of negotiations being taken over by a new body consisting mainly of representatives of Ukraine and the so-called separatist people's republics, and the Russian Federation formally distancing itself from the matter of settling the situation in eastern Ukraine. Kozak was supported by Viktor Medvedchuk, who called on the Ukrainian leadership to make legislative changes and grant Donbas wide-ranging autonomy. The COVID-19 pandemic made it easier for Ukraine to withdraw from those ideas.

The Russians, by demanding that Ukraine meet its obligations, are continuing the policy aimed at making it impossible to reintegrate Kremlin-controlled territories with Ukraine. The militarisation of Crimea and the economic and military aid to the self-styled republics are carried out on a broad scale. Additionally, in spring 2019, passports were provided en masse to the inhabitants of Donbas, with Ukrainian intelligence services estimating that over 630,000 people have obtained Russian citizenship through a simplified procedure.

One attempt to broker a compromise was the project of a new formula for settling the Donbas conflict, prepared by France and Germany and

presented on 12th November 2020. After comments by the Ukrainian and Russian sides, a new version of the project was presented for consultation on 19th January 2021, proposing a division of the areas of negotiation into 11 clusters drawn up between the parties, which are to be the basis for preparing a road map to settle the Donbas conflict. The Ukrainian delegation, led by the head of the Presidential Office Andriy Yermak, held the position that everything should be taken as a whole. Dmitry Kozak considered that the individual clusters should be negotiated and jointly accepted once a consensus has been reached, in order to focus on disputed questions. On 8th February, the Russian Federation added its views to the project, and on 16th February, at its request, the separatists were included in work on the clusters, after adding their reservations to the Russian ones. Ukraine did not agree to such a solution, and has therefore not yet presented its own position. Meanwhile, it has struck hard at pro-Russian circles by imposing sanctions on Viktor Medvedchuk and pro-Russian TV channels 112 Ukraina, ZIK, and NewsOne. The Russian Federation tried to force it to yield by mobilising its military at the Ukrainian border and in Crimea in March and April 2021.

Attempts to de-escalate tensions included a Biden/Putin summit, held on 16th June 2021 in Geneva, during which there was discussion of a settlement of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. It should be added that the Russian delegation included Dmitry Kozak. The parties considered that the conflict should be settled based on the Minsk agreements, but the Russian Federation had a slightly different interpretation of the regulations contained therein. Numerous statements by leading politicians in Vladimir Putin's entourage show that the Kremlin authorities blame Ukraine for the impasse in talks concerning Donbas. It is worth mentioning that, at the same time, the French President Emmanuel Macron raised the idea of organising a similar EU-Russia summit.

Of the greatest significance from the point of view of Ukraine was the US withdrawing from sanctions over the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, which was meant to form part of a strategy of warmer relations with EU states, particularly Germany. Ukraine is also disappointed with Germany's position, which has consistently aimed to activate the pipeline, ignoring the warnings of Central Eastern European states. The gas crisis of autumn 2021 showed that those fears were not exaggerated. The deliberate limiting of natural gas supplies to the European Union by Gazprom, with the aim of exerting pressure with regard to certifying the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, demonstrated what a great threat gas dependence on the Russian Federation is from an energy security point of view.

## Conclusions

Over the past two decades, Russia has shown enormous determination to reintegrate the post-Soviet region. Guaranteeing itself hegemonic influence in the post-Soviet space and ejecting the West serves – in Russian eyes – to strengthen its status as a regional and global power, and to realise a range of more minor interests of a socio-economic nature. In addition, in order to defend its sphere of influence, Russia has not hesitated to follow a confrontational policy towards the West. It should also be stressed that the dependence of Ukraine and other Eastern European states on Russia (in many aspects) is significant and clear. In other words, Russia possesses many instruments for influencing the internal situations of those countries.<sup>18</sup>

The Kremlin is worried by the rapid process of democratic transformations in Ukraine, which Russian political analysts believe constitutes an enormous threat to the interests of Russia and its political decision-makers. It is well known that Ukraine can only be democratised with the help of western structures and close cooperation with them. Russia is aware of this, which is why it reacts so strongly to the possibility of Ukrainian membership of the EU and NATO. One may even dare say that Russia's strategic aim with regard to Ukraine is to prevent it from democratising and integrating with the West.<sup>19</sup>

Retaining control of Donbas is one of the key instruments enabling the Kremlin authorities to destabilise Ukraine, thus hindering its closer ties with western structures. There should be no expectation that the Russian Federation will voluntarily resign from this, even if it were a condition for normalising relations with the West. This is why the Normandy Summit of December 2019, in line with expectations, did not bring about any breakthrough in Ukrainian-Russian relations. The same was true of other attempts made by Russia, Germany and France. Ukraine does not agree to the Russian interpretation of the Minsk agreements. For its part, the position of the Kremlin authorities is extremely anti-Ukrainian. An article by Vladimir Putin of 12th July 2021 stressed the unity of the Russian and Ukrainian nations in the spirit of 19th century pan-Russian nationalism, and undermined Ukrainian subjectivity by suggesting that Ukraine is run

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<sup>18</sup> E. Korosteleva, *Evaluating the role of partnership in the European Neighbourhood Policy: The Eastern neighbourhood*, "Eastern Journal of European Studies", vol. 4(3)/2013, pp. 11–36.

<sup>19</sup> For more details see: T. Stępniewski, *The Eastern Policy of the European Union. The Role of Poland*, "POLITEJA. Pismo Wydziału Studiów Międzynarodowych i Politycznych Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego", nr 41/2016, pp. 181–193; E. Korosteleva, *EU-Russia relations in the context of the eastern neighbourhood*, "Policy Brief", Bertelsmann Stiftung, Gütersloh, May 2016.

from outside by the West, which wishes to make it into an “Anti-Russia”. A similar thesis is to be found in an article by Dmitry Medvedev which appeared on 11th November in the Russian newspaper “Kommersant”.<sup>20</sup>

The dynamics of the geostrategic processes in the Eastern European region invite the opinion that the approach to the region by EU states must change to suit the current situation. The armed conflict in Ukraine and Russia's increasingly assertive stance towards its Eastern neighbours mean that a united Europe should adapt its decision-making process to the new phenomena in the international environment, and even more so as new US President Joe Biden does not always display an understanding of this part of Europe (particularly Ukraine), which also raises new challenges from the point of view of the EU's eastern policy. Another significant phenomena is some Eastern European states' lack of desire for collaboration, and the civilisational differences forming within societies and their destabilising them politically. It should also be remembered that one of the major elements hindering the European Union's cooperation with the states of Eastern Europe is the corruption eating away at the political systems of the states in the region, which hobbles or even prevents a pro-European transformation.

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