



Current State of Ukraine's Play within the Geopolitical Map of Europe

By Iuliia Osmolovska

Introduction

The beginning of November has been rich on worrisome developments in Eastern Europe and around Ukraine in particular. With reports of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) of continued and ever growing number of ceasefire violations on the frontline in Donetsk and Lugansk regions - climbing to more than 750 daily on 12th and 13th November - satellite data on suspicious build-up of Russian forces near the Ukrainian border and respective US warning its EU allies of Russia's

potential invasion in Ukraine, migrant crisis on Polish-Belarusian border leading to aggressive land and aerial border patrol checks by joint Belarus and Russia military forces - the whole security landscape of Eastern Europe becomes ever more shaky and troublesome. Spiced up with undeclared energy war in Europe and Trojan Horse of Nord Stream 2, muscle stretching in the Black Sea, still-to-be-defined political configuration and policies of the new German government, turbulent presidential-

run-up France, everything leads to ideal mulled waters for perfect fishing.

At first glance, all the mentioned presents rather gloomy picture of unfavorable setting, in which Ukraine has to operate nowadays. Russia seemingly has a tactical upper hand in its confrontation with the West and enjoys this advantage. Yet, this could be true, if we ignore some fundamental systemic changes. They are firmly shaping irreversibility of Ukraine's pro-Western orientation and ever further steady integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures, thus leaving tiny fading prospect for potential return of Ukraine into Russian orbit of influence. Recent poll data demonstrate that 62% of Ukrainians support the country's integration into the EU, while 58% support Ukraine's membership in NATO. The number of Ukrainians, who see better guarantees in Ukraine's membership in NATO has risen to 55% in 2020 (compared to 26% for neutral status and 5% for a military union with Russia and other CIS countries).

Some people argue that the longer the conflict between Russia and Ukraine goes, the more it exhausts Ukraine. Nevertheless, in the long run the conflict plays against Russia's interest to exert its influence over Ukraine, as on the 8th year of undeclared war the outlook of a new generation of Ukrainians is formed in the perception of Russia being a hostile adversary

rather than a caring "big brother". Pro-Soviet Union sentiment becomes less relevant; given the fact that the generation of Soviet Ukrainians is growing older. For those aged 40-50 with more moderate position on Russia, it has become evident that Ukraine should not expect a miracle of Russia's sudden turn into a mature responsible neighbor, who could let this country go its own way. One important aspect should not be diminished. It is genuinely about a civilizational choice of a free democracy versus authoritarian state. For 30 years of independence Ukrainians have got used to live in a free and open, however imperfect, democratic society. The example of subordinate Belarus is a perfect illustrative case of how Russia could crack one's bones in a brotherly love hugs. Ukrainians do not want that future for themselves. Prolonging its aggression makes Russian civilizational option less and less attractive for Ukrainians.

Paradoxically enough, but having launched this hybrid war against Ukraine out of desire to prevent Ukraine from reapproaching with the EU and NATO, Russia has in fact only crystallized this geopolitical choice of Ukraine. Since 2014, the foreign policy of Ukraine has become more systemic and definitive in terms of conceptual thinking. During 2019-2021 the irreversibility of European and Euro-Atlantic course of Ukraine has been fixed in the Constitution of Ukraine, as

well as in the Strategy of National Security, the Strategy of Military Security, and in the Strategy of Foreign Policy of Ukraine. These documents also laid down main geopolitical configuration of Ukraine's allies, partners and adversaries, thus leaving minor room for ambiguity. Priority strategic relations status is given to USA, the UK, Canada, Germany and France, while Russia has been defined as "military adversary", who "undertakes military aggression against Ukraine and temporarily occupied part of its territory". With such a definite clarity of Ukraine's foreign policy outline, yet, there are still two important questions. Do Ukraine's partners and institutions of strategic vocation see Ukraine through the same lenses, as the Ukrainians see them? How far the reality of '*real-politik*' alters the desired vectors of destination and highlights 50 shadows of grey in Ukrainian partners and allies?

US-Ukraine: cognitive dissonance over visible concord?

The assessment of current political dialogue between Ukraine and the US is marked by a cognitive dissonance. A pre-electoral promise of the US President Joe Biden "to make Ukraine a priority of foreign policy" and to hold Russia accountable for its actions in Ukraine clashes with the White House's engagement with

Russia to prevent strategic advancement of China. Verbal opposition to Nord Stream 2 project conflicts with the Biden administration getting milder on sanctions and a controversial Joint Statement with the German Chancellor Angela Merkel on European Energy Security. The support to European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations of Ukraine does not match the US appetite to lobby a NATO Membership Action Plan for Ukraine.

A renewed US-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership was adopted on 10 November 2021.

It would be fair to say, however, that since the meeting of the presidents of Ukraine and the US in September 2021, the bilateral relations have been streamlined with some encouraging signs of consistency. A renewed US-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership, which duly takes into account modern challenges of a hybrid war with Russia and sets mutual commitment to deter Russia, was adopted on 10 November 2021. The sittings of the bilateral Strategic Partnership Commission (SPC) and its Working Groups have been resumed with some pre-planned activities for 2022. The dialogue of the ministers of defense of both countries has been unprecedentedly intense with three personal meetings since September this year. The US has also become more pro-active in assessing the

threats coming from Russia. Having monitored recent buildup of Russian forces near the Ukrainian border, the US has been raising the alarm with the EU and even consulting on a plan of common actions in case of Russian full-scale invasion in Ukraine. It seems like the Western allies have eventually begun to understand the harm of appeasement and consider a different strategy.

It seems like the fatal withdrawal from Afghanistan has become a crisis, which opened up opportunities for the US and its European allies to draw bitter lessons from mistakes. The ability of the US to export democratic values could be enhanced with the help of Ukraine. Alarmistic calls of Russia that the US has lost this ability could be effectively neutralized by more sound and coordinated resolution of the US and its NATO allies to stand by Ukraine and to continue their support to democratic transformation of the country.

Nord Stream 2: What is behind Russian fairy tale?

Provided Ukraine's Western allies were good at Russian folklore, they would have been, literally, frozen by the hint in words of the Russian President Vladimir Putin, which he had said at the Russian Energy Week in late October 2021. Commenting on peak gas prices in Europe,

Putin allegorically used a Russian fairy tale of a wolf, whose tail went frozen when he tried to go fishing in winter. The Russian President hinted that Europeans could get frozen like the wolf's tail did, but forgot to mention that it was the sly fox, who put the wolf into the trap of iced waters. Hoping to get some easy catch, the wolf naively trusted the foxy promises of anticipated benefits and got his tail torn away. This is a punch line to be kept in mind, while considering the Russian energy strategy for Europe. The Europeans could get easily trapped by Russian generous promises of Nord Stream 2 benefits and be left damaged.

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Modest opposition in European capitals to the completion of Nord Stream 2 project encourages Russia to glorify its victory over energy-dependant Europeans, who pretend to turn a blind eye to a dual-use hydroacoustic equipment installed on the bottom of the Baltics, or to an eco-harmful technology of gas extraction in Circum-Arctic region with extra CH₄ and CO₂ emissions. Pragmatic Europeans tend to believe that Russian direct contracts with Europe will discipline Russia to become a predictable and

reliable partner, who respects legal rules of a game. Definitely, Russia will respect the rules, but only those written by Russian legislators. One should not forget a “national legislation supremacy” clause, which Russians have invented recently to override uncomfortable international legal commitments, and the picture will be visible through different lenses. Damage from Nord Stream 2 could be far more reaching and dramatic in its consequences.

A lot will depend on level of resistance of European capitals to unethical gas games that Russia is currently playing in Europe.

Unlike other Europeans, Ukrainians know perfectly well the Russian folklore and mindset to understand the overall security volatility, which enshrines with the launching of Nord Stream 2. For recent years, Ukraine has been constantly alarming its European partners that cutting off gas transit through its territory would escalate risks of further Russian military advancement in Ukraine, thus, severely undermining security environment in entire Europe. Recent decision of “Bundesnetzagentur” to invite NJSC “Naftogaz” and GTSOU of Ukraine to participate in the certification process of Nord Stream 2 could be seen as a small tactical victory. Ukraine could win time to secure better transit guarantees

with the help of European and US partners. A lot will depend on level of resistance of European capitals to unethical gas games that Russia is currently playing in Europe.

Russia: Permanent state of alertness

Beginning of November 2021 has become somehow nervous for most of the Europeans with a number of reports on Russian build-up close to Ukrainian borders. Positive side of the story is that this time we have seen more coordinated response from the US and European capitals, as well as from NATO and the EU. Even France and Germany followed the suit with respective warnings that any new attempt to undermine Ukraine’s territorial integrity would have serious consequences for Russia. The attention to the developments has not even been distracted by events on Polish-Belorussian border, which is a painful drama in itself. Nor has it been overshadowed by escalation of tensions in the Balkans or in the Black Sea region. That could be a good sign that the Western allies have already learned how to stay focused on Russian malign activities on different parts of the chess-board.

Ukrainian officials have been constantly warning that the threat from Russia remains acute.

Somehow confusing, however, has been the reaction from Ukrainian officials, who called not to spread panic and to stay alert. These statements do not mean that Ukrainians are ignorant to the information from their American and European partners. It is an indication that Ukrainians are in a constant state of alertness, as far as Russia is concerned. Ukrainian officials have been constantly warning that the threat from Russia remains acute and it could emanate from everywhere. For instance, largely owing to this pro-active position of Ukraine, it has been possible to draw more attention of Western allies to the situation in the Black Sea, which enabled to bring more contoured approach to the security in the region and, at least tactically, to prevent Russian dominance in waters in autumn of 2021.

Ukraine has substantially matured in fighting modern hybrid war with Russia.

The said does not mean that Ukraine is overconfident about its military capacity to withstand Russia alone. It is constantly working hard to improve its military capabilities, also with the help of foreign military assistance and support. Nevertheless, national spirit remains high. Despite the exhausting experience of eight years of untagged war with Russia, the number of Ukrainians, who

are ready to fight for Ukraine's independence and defend the country with arms, has grown to over 60% (with 54% in 2017 and 33% in 2013). Ukraine has substantially matured in fighting modern hybrid war with Russia. To date, it is the only European army with real ground experience of resisting Russian military forces in a modern warfare.

Ukraine in Russia's "wish list"

The said above drives us to a logical question, what does actually Russia want from Ukraine. Could we assume that the Russian wishes are compatible with Ukraine's independent life at all? Well, the infamous article of Putin "On Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" (2021) gives a very definite answer of "no". The article, or rather a "political manifesto", questions the lawfulness of modern Ukraine's statehood and draws a conclusion that "genuine sovereignty of Ukraine is possible exactly in partnership with Russia", because "we are one folk".

For Russia, Kyiv has always been perceived as a spiritual cradle of the Ancient Rus'.

It is a tricky exercise to dive into a history and try to justify contemporary actions by picking

up a comfortable historic period from the past. An attempt to present modern Ukraine as an artificial product of the Soviet époque, which has been created at the expense of the historical territories of Russia, will not help much to convince young generation of Ukrainians, who lost their loved ones in the war, of a pre-determined prosperous common future. In modern Ukrainian society there is no illusion about Russian appetites. In 2021 74% of Ukrainians perceive Russia as a threat, and 53.5% define the Donbas armed conflict as a Russian aggression with the use of local proxies against Ukraine. Vladimir Putin, apparently, was not aware of these illustrative polls. Otherwise, he would understand that his claims of still strong “great love” sentiments of million of Ukrainians towards Russia were obsolete. For Russia, Kyiv has always been perceived as a spiritual cradle of the Ancient Rus’. From this understanding, Russia would love to never let Ukraine go sovereign. Especially Ukraine, which represents entirely opposite civilizational choice of a free democracy. This triggers Russia greatly. It would rather prefer to see Ukraine as a failed or fragmented quasi-state than to admit that Ukraine did not find post-Soviet autocracy of Russia attractive and safely drifted away.

France and Germany: 50 shades of grey

It should be realized that the mediation capacity to find a political solution in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine with the help of these European partners has reached its limits. Normandy and Minsk formats are in a deep deadlock now, with no glimpse of hope. While acknowledging heroic efforts of France and Germany to keep the process ongoing, little, if any, progress has been made since the 2019 Paris meeting of Normandy Four (N4). France and Germany could do little, as actual moment for a breakthrough has not ripened yet, and there is no genuine desire of Russia to negotiate. Russia could tolerate the status-quo and could afford itself to wait for a more favorable moment to press with its demands.

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Forthcoming political turbulence in France and formation of a new government in Germany are perfect mulled waters for Russia to go fishing, especially when historic heritage of Angela Merkel has left Ukraine with some bitter aftertaste. Yet, recently published diplomatic correspondence of France and Germany with Russia shows that these European countries

have taken firm and principled position on the conflict in Eastern Ukraine and, contrary to Russian wishes, have not doubts about genuine role of Russia there. Hybrid war with Russia have not only made Ukraine experienced, but matured enough to understand the difference between the European *'diplomatic politesse'* and *'real-politik'*. Ukrainians have already learned how to read between the lines and to form realistic expectations from the partners, while constructing viable tactics to defend their interests.

End of the journey: The European family of nations

The driving motive of Ukraine to get EU/NATO membership has often been confused in the West with a simplistic view of a desperate desire "to belong to the Clubs". In fact, Ukraine's membership in European and Euro-Atlantic structures is about *modus vivendi* as a developed democracy with strong security and sustainable economy. The prospect of membership in Ukraine serves as a lighthouse. But path shall be easier to cover when someone is waiting to welcome you. Ukraine is well aware that obstacles to the membership lie not only in its readiness to comply with the Copenhagen or Brussels criteria, but also in reserved position of some EU and NATO members.

The Ukraine-EU Association Agreement is a fruitful soil for advancing relations.

Ukraine works on both internal reforms and political dialogue with the EU and NATO members. Current absence of positive response on EU membership is not considered in Ukraine as a failure of foreign policy, but rather as a moment, which has not ripened yet. The logic of current Ukraine's rapprochement with the EU is seen in an "organic integration", which implies steady upgrade in relations, even if the political answer to European aspirations of Ukraine has been temporarily put off the agenda. The Ukraine-EU Association Agreement is a fruitful soil for advancing relations. Ukraine intends to use the potential of political association and economic integration of the Agreement in full, before considering next stage of relations. Meanwhile, Ukraine develops new formats to accelerate its rapprochement with the EU, the most recent of which being the Association Trio with Moldova and Georgia, the Lublin Triangle with Poland and Lithuania, new triangles with Romania and Moldova etc. In fact, political circumstances are changeable. Nobody can be confident in a pre-determined future.

Iuliia Osmolovska is the Executive Director of the Eastern Europe Security Institute, based in Kyiv, Ukraine

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Institut za razvoj i međunarodne odnose
Institute for Development and International Relations

 **Hanns
Seidel
Stiftung**

Ured u Zagrebu

Institute for Development and International
Relations - IRMO
Lj. F. Vukotinovića 2, Zagreb, Croatia
www.irmo.hr

Hanns Seidel Stiftung
Amruševa 9, Zagreb, Croatia
www.hanns-seidel-stiftung.com.hr

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