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Cliff-hangers

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IS LOSS OF TERRITORY BY EASTERN EUROPEAN STATES WHEN CHOOSING INTEGRATION WITH THE WEST INEVITABLE?

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Thirty years after the post-Soviet republics' independence was proclaimed and internationally recognized, the nations of the Eastern European region continue to struggle to protect their sovereignty, against the backdrop of permanent political and economic instability, military conflicts, and security challenges. In this paper it is argued that pro-Western orientation and desire to participate in Western integration projects have deepened the sovereignty crisis and exacerbated long-standing conflicts in the region. This article attempts to analyse whether this damage has occurred as a result of the European and Euro-Atlantic choice of the East European countries or whether it can be attributed to a number of domestic and external factors, which existed before these countries became independent.

Introduction

Eastern Europe is often described in the West as the “arc of instability” – a term that comprises a chain of neighbouring countries that are geopolitically vulnerable and politically unstable internally. Historically, the region has been divided between different empires. After the collapse of the Communist Bloc, new states were established. Along with independence, they inherited a number of internal economic and social problems, unresolved ethnic contradictions, and territorial claims. The region of Eastern Europe and New Eastern Europe, which includes Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus, has always been in the sphere of interests of external actors. Today, the sovereignty of these countries is

in crisis. However, the question is whether it is caused by increased cooperation and integration with the West, or other domestic and external factors that existed before the nations defined the vector of their foreign policy.

To answer this question, we should start by defining the concept of “sovereignty”, and whether we, the countries of the New Eastern Europe can be called “sovereign”.

Nowadays, the concept of sovereignty still spurs scientific debate. Each of the suggested definitions bears the mark of the political situation of a particular era and prevailing ideologies. Often, they contradict each other. The most generalized point of view is based on identifying sovereignty

with the highest (supreme) power. This definition was provided by I. Trainin¹, who associated sovereignty with the supreme power, unlimited within the state and independent in external relations. Some scholars, such as E. Usenko², proposed a more specific interpretation, considering sovereignty as an independent state power, insubordinate to the power of the second state, which, in our opinion, generally reflects the essence of state sovereignty. Another important criterion of a sovereign state, according to C. Tilly³, is its ability to eliminate external threats from outside its own territory. Some theories⁴ identify sovereignty with international legal personality – the ability of a state to be a subject of international law.

Are the Countries of New Eastern Europe Sovereign?

None of the countries examined in this study meet the above criteria. Back in the early 1990s, Moscow provoked, on the internationally recognized territory of Moldova, an artificial conflict that culminated in creating a separate territorial entity – Transnistria – within the country. Following a similar pattern in the post-Soviet space, Ukraine lost control of the Crimean Peninsula in February-March 2014. Shortly afterwards, certain parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions were seized as a result of Russia-led armed aggression.

Belarus remains a geographically integral country without manifesting a chronic lack of sovereignty. However, due to the establishment of an authoritarian,

unipyramidal regime, the lack of economic interest from European states, and the blatant disregard of democratic values, Belarus has isolated itself from the West, and limited its international sovereignty. The bifurcation point for Belarus in relations with the West was the result of last August presidential election. The EU countries and Ukraine declared those elections to have been rigged, and the Government of Lukashenko – as illegitimate.



From a practical perspective, the societies of the Eastern European region, since the collapse of the Socialist Bloc in 1989-1991, have been exercising sovereignty under their political actors' interpretation of this concept

From a practical perspective, the societies of the Eastern European region, since the collapse of the Socialist Bloc in 1989-1991, have been exercising sovereignty under their political actors' interpretation of this concept. Naturally, the state and sovereignty perception has evolved over the past decades. T. Zick in his work «Are the States Sovereign?»⁵ attributes this evolution to external pressure from multinational corporations, international organizations and supranational entities, as well as to the growth of separatist sentiments among the population, and the growing trend toward greater autonomy of national and religious minorities within the country. The spread

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- 1 I. Trainin, *К вопросу о суверенитете* [On the issue of sovereignty], "Soviet state and law", 1983, p. 75.
 - 2 E. Usenko, *Теоретические проблемы соотношения международного и внутригосударственного права* [Theoretical problems of the correlation between international and domestic law], "Nauka", Moscow 1997, pp. 57 – 91.
 - 3 C. Tilly, *European States, AD 990-1992*, Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell 1990, p. 23.
 - 4 I. Levin, *Суверенитет* [Sovereignty], Legal Center Press: 2003, p. 74.
 - 5 T. Zick, *Are the States Sovereign?*, "Washington University Law Quarterly", Vol. 83, 2005, p. 230.

of nationalist ideology led to the collapse of multinational alliances and the development of sovereign independent states.

The Regional Context

For this part of Europe, the concept of “sovereignty” is linked to its historical past. The region has been dissolved two times in the past five hundred years. According to M. Minakov⁶, the foundation of the post-Soviet nations was based on the main concepts of sovereignty:

- people or ethnonational sovereignty – the right of the people to self-determination;
- individual sovereignty – rights and freedoms of an individual;
- regional values – acquired as a result of the adoption of fundamental international treaties and the implementation of European norms.

Nevertheless, at the beginning of the 21st century, the political systems of the post-Soviet countries showed their inefficiency and were experiencing a deep crisis. In Ukraine, this crisis was manifested in the Orange Revolution (2004); in Moldova, without significant changes in the regime in power, democratization processes took place. The authoritarian regime in Belarus suppressed any revolutionary sentiments among the population. Therefore, the contradictions increasingly grew, which induced further military intervention, and the outbreak of armed conflicts in the region.

The security of the Eastern European countries, which were dealing with their own political difficulties, was also influenced by the launch of integration projects and

initiatives under the auspices of both the West and Russia: the establishment of the Eastern Partnership (2009), the enlargement of the EU and NATO, the Eurasian Union. The region was caught between two fires: two integration projects and two systems with contrasting values and different visions of security. The geopolitical and geoeconomic significance of Eastern Europe has increased, and Eastern (New Eastern) Europe has found itself in the middle of competition between European and non-European centres of power (like the United States) since it has a powerful concentrated geopolitical and strategic potential⁷. As a result of European Union and NATO enlargement toward the East and the implementation of Russia's foreign policy initiatives, the region became a space of external common strategic interests. The latter includes Ukraine and Moldova – countries without clear membership prospects either in the EU or in NATO – and Belarus, which joined the Eurasian integration project. Despite different foreign policy priorities, all three countries are forced to walk a tightrope between the two systems and fight for their national interests. Consequently, the sovereignty of these countries will continue to be under threat, as long as they are regarded as bargaining chips during negotiations between key partners aiming to reach political and economic compromises.

The Quest for Hegemony

The activation of integration processes and the signing of a number of cooperation agreements incited confrontation in the region. They led to the consolidation of the elites in authoritarian power regimes,

6 M. Minakov, *Post-Soviet sovereignty and Ukraine's political development*, “UA: Ukraine Analytica”, №2 (24), 2021, p. 29.

7 О. Кхулко, *Параметри безпекового середовища України* [The parameters of the security environment of Ukraine], “Міжнародні відносини. Серія “Політичні Науки”, №3 (2014)”, 2014
[http://journals.iir.kiev.ua/index.php/pol_n/article/view/2235/1994].

which were struggling to maintain their influence in the region. However, other crucial political, economic and cultural factors have contributed to the vulnerability of democracies and jeopardized state sovereignty since the formation of the new states. The newly formed republics have entered a new democratic era with weak economies, unresolved ethnonational issues, instability, and uncertainty about the future. The central driver of destabilization in the region has been the policy of Russia, which is satisfied with the situation and has fulfilled its geopolitical ambitions of maintaining hegemony in the region and bringing the former republics back into the Kremlin's geopolitical orbit.

According to this policy⁸, the Russian Federation identifies its own security with the limited sovereignty of its neighbours, especially those which are part of the so-called Russian civilizational space, within such projects as «Russian World» (“Русский мир”) and the Eurasian Union. Russia has created all the necessary legal grounds for this. The Constitution of the Russian Federation⁹ proclaims that the state's duty is their citizens' protection and their patronage abroad. The recently updated National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation, approved by decree of Russian President Vladimir Putin, declares Russia's support for its allies and partners in resolving defence and security issues, and neutralizing attempts to exert external interference in their internal affairs. It stipulates the strengthening of «fraternal ties» between Russians, Belarussians and Ukrainians. The

intention to support compatriots living abroad in preserving their rights, including their all-Russian cultural identity, was also laid out¹⁰.

Thus, ignoring international law and acting in accordance only with its own legislation, Russia consolidated its presence in the territory of the Republic of Moldova by deploying a Russian contingent of peacekeeping forces in order to resolve the armed conflict in Transnistria in 1992. Russian-backed separatist movements in the regions of Moldova with an overall majority Russian population led to the establishment of a separate state-territorial entity within the territory of Moldova.



The activation of integration processes and the signing of a number of cooperation agreements incited confrontation in the region. They led to the consolidation of the elites in authoritarian power regimes, which were struggling to maintain their influence in the region

To this day, the Transnistrian standoff remains a “frozen conflict”, and the Russian Federation has maintained its presence in Transnistria, having stationed its peacekeepers there and created one of the largest Russian diasporas abroad. Moreover, a virtual majority of the population of

8 М. Каритоненко, *Політика Росії щодо сусідніх держав (Доктрина “обмеженого суверенітету”)* [Russia's Neighborhood Policy (The Doctrine of the “limited sovereignty”)], “Foreign Policy Portal”, 2019, [http://fpp.com.ua/polytyka-rosiyi-shhodo-susidnih-derzhav-doktryna-obmezhenogo-suverenitetu]

9 *Конституция Российской Федерации (принята всенародным голосованием 12 декабря 1993 года)* [The Constitution of the Russian Federation (adopted by National Voting on December 12, 1993)], “Constitution of Russian Federation”, December, 1993 [http://www.constitution.ru]

10 *Указ Президента РФ от 2 июля 2021 г. № 400 “О Стратегии национальной безопасности РФ”* [Decree of the President of the Russian Federation №400 dated July 2, 2021 “On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation”], “Official website with the official text of legal acts of the Russian Federation” [www.pravo.gov.ru].

Transnistria have Russian passports and fall under the protection of the Russian Federation. Before the pro-European government led by Maia Sandu came to power in 2020, for more than three decades, all power was concentrated in the hands of socialists, which allowed pro-Russian forces to take control of all representative and government structures. Russia has secured its dominance in Moldova's information field, and strengthened the position of the Moscow Patriarchate. Another critical factor that limits Moldova's sovereignty and threatens its political independence is Moldova's complete dependence on Russian gas supplies. Only this year, after the termination of the contract with the Russian state-owned gas company Gazprom, Moldova, for the first time in 30 years, began to look for alternative gas supply routes (from Ukraine and Romania).



the concept of balancing between East and West no longer makes sense for Ukraine, following Russia's aggression in 2014 and the loss of control over the territories of the Crimean Peninsula and parts of Donbas. This conflict caused damage to the territorial integrity of Ukraine, completely changing the course of its foreign policy

Ukraine holds a prominent place in the implementation of the doctrine of "limited sovereignty" of the Russian Federation. Without Ukraine, according to the firm belief of Z. Brzezinski¹¹, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire. Besides sharing a common border, Ukraine and Russia have been united

by a closely intertwined historical past, economic ties, and political culture. After the declaration of independence, Ukraine began to perceive its own sovereignty in a new way, separate from its socialist past, which was also driven by some subsequent democratic processes, ideological pluralism, an open economy, the development of national identity, and a multi-vector foreign policy. Ukraine chose to establish and maintain ties with the West, and Russia but did not outline strategic vectors of its foreign policy up until 2014. It has forced the Ukrainian authorities to seek compromises favouring Russia's interests, and also allowed the Russian Federation to consistently and repeatedly interfere in the internal and external affairs of Ukraine through political, diplomatic, economic, energy (gas wars), information, and propaganda pressure for decades.

Interestingly, the concept of balancing between East and West no longer makes sense for Ukraine, following Russia's aggression in 2014 and the loss of control over the territories of the Crimean Peninsula and parts of Donbas. This conflict caused damage to the territorial integrity of Ukraine, completely changing the course of its foreign policy. The choice of Ukraine to look to Europe, officially embedded in the Constitution of Ukraine in July 2019, was a result, and not a cause, of the violation of its state sovereignty.

Equally important, after the military intervention of the Russian Federation in Georgia in 2008, and the establishment of the self-proclaimed republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the possibility of war between the countries in the region became a reality. This signal was not overlooked, and even at that time, analysts predicted a repeat of the Georgian scenario in Ukraine.

11 Z. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, Basic Books: New York, 1997, pp. 61, 114.

The issue of Crimea has always been a ticking time bomb in Russian-Ukrainian relations. During the time of the presence of the Russian Federation Black Sea fleet in Ukraine, under the "Agreement between Ukraine and the Russian Federation concerning stay of the Black Sea Fleet of the Russian Federation in the territory of Ukraine" (1997), Russia consolidated the presence of its military formations in the territory of Ukraine, contrary to the provisions of Article 17 of the Constitution of Ukraine¹². Russia also systematically violated its obligations, used leased facilities to gather intelligence, conducted propaganda activities, and supported separatist movements¹³.

The constant destabilizing policy of the Russian Federation toward Ukraine limited the sovereignty of an already weak and vulnerable state. Regardless of their tendencies and developments in favour of particular global or regional players, Russia has sought and will continue to strive to return Ukraine to its sphere of influence through sabotaging the peaceful settlement in Donbas and resolution of the Crimean issue, undermining the internal political situation, implementing targeted disinformation campaigns, and supporting separatist tendencies at the national and regional levels.

Belarus has become another stomping ground for Russia's revisionist ambitions. Like Ukraine, Belarus tried to stick to the model of a "bridge" between East and West and to build relations with NATO and the EU. However, the signing of "The Treaty on the Creation of a Union State" with Russia guaranteed that Belarus would continue to remain in the sphere of Russian influence, finally defining its geopolitical configuration.

By opting for the integration project with Russia, Belarus was able to protect its own sovereignty and get certain economic benefits. Nevertheless, Russian support, going together with dictating its own rules, contributed to Belarus remaining at the same stage of development, developing an economic, military, and energy dependence on Russia. In the grip of concentric circles of integration with Russia, Belarus is practically unable to pursue an independent foreign policy.



The new Eastern Europe continues to be a region that unites countries with compromised sovereignty, multi-level contradictions, and security threats

Against the backdrop of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the Belarussian authorities acted as a mediator, and focused on distancing themselves from Russia's aggressive policy and restoring contacts with the EU and the United States. In particular, a great deal of effort was put into involving Belarus in the Eastern Partnership and the Visegrad Four. On top of that, a long-standing ban on the number of American diplomats in the country was also lifted. However, the results of last year's presidential election, suppressing the opposition and dispersing mass protests, cast a long shadow on the integrity of the Lukashenko government. Amid Belarus' isolation on the global stage, Lukashenko resorted to deeper integration with Russia, gaining President Putin's political and military support.

12 Конституція України від 28 червня 1996 р. [Constitution of Ukraine dated June 28, 1996], Parliament of Ukraine, 1996, Chapter 1, Article 17 [<http://zakon.rada.gov.ua/cgi-bin/laws/main.cgi?nreg=254%EA%2F96%2D%E2%F01>]

13 V. Gorbunin, *Крим. Війна: передумови російської агресії* [Crimea. War: preconditions of the Russian aggression], National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine, 2016 [<https://www.rnbo.gov.ua/ua/Diialnist/2399.html1>]

Constant pressure and interference from the Kremlin forced Belarus to develop relations with the West. Similarly, the crisis in relations with the West returned Belarus to the path of a closer union with Russia. Further deepening of this integration will encroach on the sovereignty of Belarus.

Conclusions

The new Eastern Europe continues to be a region that unites countries with compromised sovereignty, multi-level contradictions, and security threats. Integration projects within the Eurasian, European and Euro-Atlantic spaces have equally deepened the crisis of sovereignty and led to an even more significant aggravation of long-lasting contradictions in the region, culminating in armed conflicts and the seizure of territories. All things considered, it would be wrong to conclude that the direct reason for the loss or damage of the sovereignty of Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus was their choice to join a specific integration project. In Eastern European states, events develop according to unique scenarios. However, they are predetermined by common historical, socio-political and economic factors already in place before these countries became independent. The societies of

the newly formed states understood and exercised their sovereignty differently, which reinforced nationalist tendencies and played a role in further secession in the region. The former republics concentrated within themselves almost all the potential for the regional dimension of Moscow's foreign policy. Russia's programmed, consistent and conscious revisionist policy, aimed at maintaining and strengthening control over its «near abroad», has led to the conservation of ineffective socio-political systems in these countries, made them weak in the face of external threats, caused a lack of democracy and stoked tensions. Under these conditions, the countries cannot fully exercise their own sovereignty and are forced to deal with risks of greater limitations or even loss of their sovereignty.

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